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Issues framing the French presidential campaign

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In every French presidential campaign, there are specific issues the candidates centre their programmes around. It is not different in 2022 either, when the country prepares for the two rounds to be held in April. This year it appears that the most important questions are France's economic performance and the standard of living, management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the related health and economic crises, handling mass immigration and enhancing security in the country, and facing climate-related issues. Candidates take different approaches based on where their positions on the political spectrum are. Right-wing candidates stress on the immigration and security issue, left-wing candidates on social issues, the green candidate on green issues. Incumbent President Emmanuel Macron however, is likely to follow up on his former campaign to ensure the promises he made will be delivered one day.

National economy, Covid-19 pandemic, immigration and security, climate change, these are the issues currently framing the presidential campaign in France. These are the issues French citizens feel strongly about, and apparently these are going to be the major challenges candidates will have to meet if they convince the electorate of the adequacy of their programmes.

Introduction

France prepares again for a new presidential election the first round of which is to be held on 10 April, while the second three weeks later, on 24 April. In the French political structure, the presidential elections are the biggest deal – so to speak – its outcome will determine the lion share of political issues in the following five years. The campaign – in practice – starts as soon as political parties or formations announce who their candidate for the elections will be and the candidates start formulating their views on different issues framing the current public debate and take their stances on traditional narratives of their political group, or simply they start advocating the issues they personally find important. Anyone can declare to run for the elections who is a French national, is older than eighteen, has the right of suffrage, is not deprived from the right of eligibility and adhered to the obligations of national service. There is one requirement though candidates-to-be must fulfil, they have to collect five hundred signatures from state officials no later than 4 March. The official campaign however, starts as late as 28 March, only two weeks before the first round.¹

There are many candidates running for the 2022 French presidential elections, the incumbent president however, is not yet one of them. Traditionally the political scene in the country is divided between the right and the left, and historically strong parties from the centre of the spectrum tend to win. Yet, already in 2017, we could witness new trends establishing into the system: the sudden and successful rise of candidates coming from bottom-up political movements, and the orientation of the electorate towards the extremes, especially on the right. In France political convictions and announced political programmes weigh a lot in the balance when citizens go to the polls, more so in the first round than in the second, as during this latter, those who could not vote their preferred candidate into the second round tend to settle either for the less radical runner or for the candidate whose programme resembles that of the one's they have originally chosen.

Lately, there are severe tensions in French society stemming from the aggressive changes the society has gone through in a relatively short period of time, and because of the economic decline the country has been experiencing for decades, that no economic programme any president had previously campaigned with seems to be able to turn into growth. As usual, this on-going presidential campaign features the issues

that concern the majority of the society and these are the problems that need to be solved in order to satisfy the electorate. As for now, two months before the vote these are the issues that frame the campaign: national economy, COVID-19, immigration and climate change.

In opinion polls the candidates' or potential candidates' popularity is the following: The incumbent president, Emmanuel Macron still leads the polls, even if he has not announced his candidature yet, 24% of those asked would vote for him. His popularity is followed by those candidates who as of now, end of January 2022 have the chance of making it to the second round by collecting 17% of the voting preferences respectively. Surprisingly both of them are women, not very surprisingly - as a reflection of the direction the society is taking - both of them are right-wing. These two women are Valérie Pécresse candidate of the conservative "Les Républicains" and Marine Le Pen, leader of the "Rassemblement National". After them, comes the extreme right essayist Eric Zemmour attracting 13% of the voting intentions while his extreme left counterpart Jean-Luc Mélenchon decks at 9%. Quite unusual, historically speaking, that the centre left does not seem to be winning over the electorate as Yannick Jadot of the Green Party, Christiane Taubira and Anne Hidalgo of the Socialist Party stand at 5%, 5% and 3% respectively.²

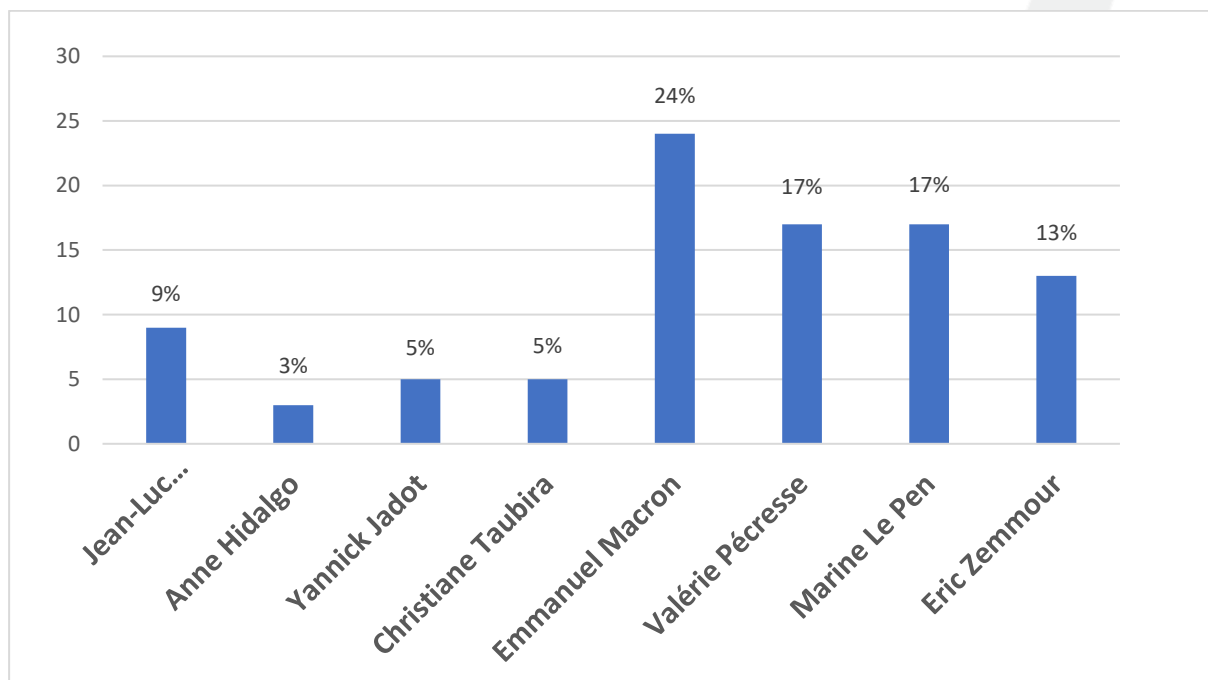


Figure 1: Opinion poll as of 28 January 2022.

National economy

Despite the many issues causing tensions in French society, it is more than probable that most votes will be decided based on economic considerations. Most French citizens indeed base their electoral choice on financial and economic prospects, to put it plainly, their choice is a matter of what they can gain personally by electing a particular candidate. French national economy is burdened by several problems, most of them have been permanent for several decades now. The French feel that their wealth is endangered, their standard of living is in decline and their employment opportunities are shrinking. To meet these challenges and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic re-localisation of the industry and the in-land production of several essential products appear in the campaign of every candidate. Furthermore, it would also be a pressing issue in French national economy to reduce public spending, as it mounted to a record high rate compared to other EU members, 62.1% of the GDP in 2020.³ Therefore, candidates have to pay attention not to promise too much that they will not be able to deliver as state budget is already extremely stretched out.

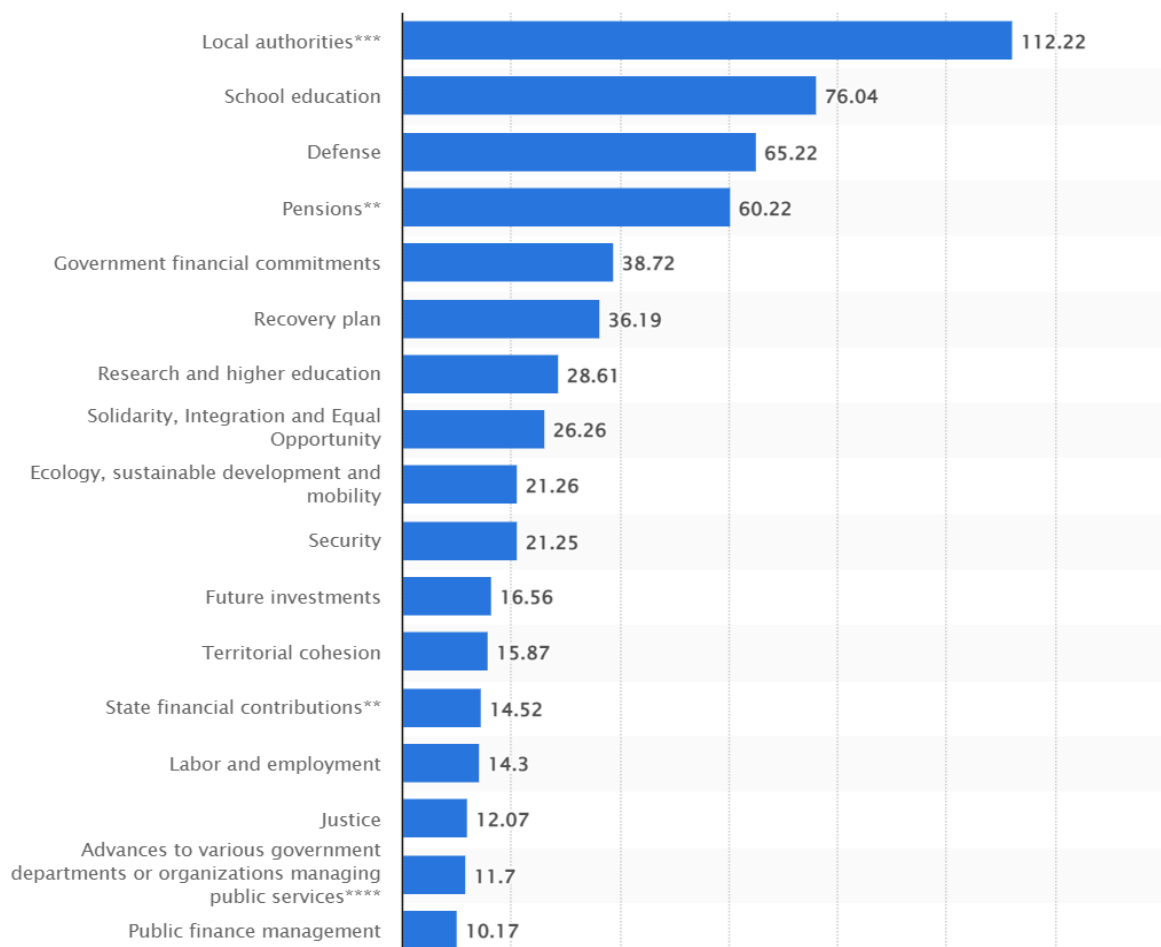


Figure 2: Distribution of the public budget in France in 2021, by spending area (in billion euros), Source: Statista⁴

In his economic programme Jean-Luc Mélenchon, candidate of the far-left movement la “France Insoumise” proposes to renationalise airports and autoroutes. Interestingly, right-wing Marine Le Pen also supports the idea of renationalising the autoroutes. Judging from Mélenchon’s political discourse it appears that he is not at all against the huge public debt weighing on France which within the EU is indicated as a severe risk factor. Moreover, he wishes to further burden the social system by moving the age of retirement back to 60 years opposing the pension reform being in the centre of President Emmanuel Macron’s campaign. As for the minimum wage he promises to increase it by EUR 142 to a net EUR 1400. What is more, he advocates for a maximum wage to be introduced in order to limit social inequalities in France.⁵ As the purchasing power of the French is becoming more and more central and as we approach the election date Mélanchon pledges to end poverty as it is, by increasing the minimum wage and by introducing a more progressive system of taxation.⁶

In her political discourse left-wing socialist Ann Hidalgo presses for the need of building a “social economy” that shows solidarity with the most unprivileged. She calls for the cooperation of big enterprises in establishing new economic norms based on solidarity and social awareness. In case she emerges to power she pledges to establish a ministry charged with this task. Moreover, in her rhetoric she envisages that the fulfilment of social criteria should be the condition for big investments. Social innovation therefore is in the forefront of her economic programme.⁷ As the social question is planted in the centre of the socialist agenda, Anne Hidalgo promises higher wages accordingly, by increasing the minimum wage to EUR 1450. That would mean a record EUR 200 increase that neither the green nor the far-left candidate have offered so far. The limitation of the upper ceiling of salaries appears in her rhetoric too. Still on the question of remunerations there is talk of doubling teachers’ wages, which for now seems a little demagogic. She is against the unemployment and pension reforms, that President Macron feels so strongly about.⁸

At the same time Green Party candidate Yannick Jadot builds his economic programme on his promise of massive government investment. The volume of the investment is projected to be EUR 50 billion, which is 2% of the country’s GDP. He

means to spend this immense amount of money on the post-pandemic reconstruction, on the modernisation of the French housing park and on the improvement of public services. As an ecologist he intends to boost sustainable consumption and to introduce a carbon tax on finances.⁹ Very close ideologically to both the socialist and the green candidate ex-Justice Minister Christiane Taubira has only recently appeared on the left side of the political spectrum. In her political career she has always shown a pro-business approach tending to support the medium and small enterprises. She stands for effective public services and against the privatisation of the energy, education and health sectors.

Current President in office Emmanuel Macron, even though he has yet to enter the campaign as an official candidate focusses his programme around the economy. Economy was indeed in the centre of his 2017 campaign where he promised fiscal consolidation, tax cuts and a strong purchasing power, however the pandemic prevented him from delivering concrete deeds in this area. What he managed to do right though, was that he could make France an attractive destination for foreign investments and he also managed to channel the country more into the international economic circulation.¹⁰ Today, industrialisation appears important in his rhetoric and also, we can expect him to continue his stance on economic questions, and hope for better conditions to be able to deliver them this time.

Valérie Pécresse who is the candidate of the centre-right “Les Républicains” also pledges to increase salaries. This project is backed by the determination to continue with the reform of the employment policy and the liberalisation of the labour market. She also aims at building a strong cooperation with the trade unions and the representatives of the business sector. In addition to this, in her programme she promises to introduce a minimum pension equal to the minimum wage.¹¹ The economic programme of Marine Le Pen quite surprisingly involves several themes of the political left, such as the age of retirement reduced to sixty and an interventionist economic policy. In addition to these she also wishes to improve the French purchasing power by renationalising autoroutes and privatising audio-visual public services. Although with a very similar political stance in most questions, the economic vision of Eric Zemmour for France is quite the opposite of that of Le Pen. He would like to rely on a very liberal economic policy that many of the electorate fear would only benefit the wealthy. Even so as he promises to increase France’s competitiveness on the global

market, and the promotion of the re-industrialisation of the economy. In the field of social policy, he claims that if elected he would only grant contributions to French citizens.¹²

COVID-19

Anne Hidalgo, who currently serves as mayor of Paris openly criticises the government for the inadequate handling of the pandemic situation. She regrets the huge stress that weighs on the hospitals, and she believes that right government actions could prevent people from being hospitalised due to a coronavirus infection. At the same time, she supports the notion of obligatory vaccination, adding that a greater public involvement is necessary in the fight against the virus.¹³ When asked about the vaccination pass before the vote at the “Assemblée Nationale” in an interview conducted by LCI Yannick Jadot said that he is against it, however he is for vaccination in itself. He explained his views by saying that this law does not concretise the end of the state of health emergency and it would grant restaurant and café owners authority to verify the personal identities of their costumers.¹⁴ Christiane Taubira also propagates vaccination as she says it is the best weapon against the virus.

As for President Macron, since the brake-out of the COVID-19 pandemic he became one of the strictest leaders in the management of the crisis be it restrictions, lockdowns or curfews. In Europe he has been a pioneer in the introduction of ever stricter measures, although we must not forget that consecutive virus waves hit the country particularly hard. The health crisis was imminent, but another related crisis also emerged: the economic crisis. As a consequence, his government launched a programme called “France Relance”, with the aim to restore French economic performance and develop it further by using the EU funds and means the nailing of which is widely attributed to the President himself, as he had a crucial role in negotiations.¹⁵ His coronavirus management is however prone to much criticism as he introduced a vaccination pass instead of the prior sanitary pass. The difference is that as of 15 February 2022 only those citizens will be allowed to use services other than the vital ones who have received at least two doses of vaccine.¹⁶ His decision, and the communicating strategy he chose to introduce them triggered vivid opposition not only

in the parliament but in the society as well. Among others Valérie Pécresse backs the vaccination pass, while Marine Le Pen on the contrary says that she would remove the sanitary pass and related regulations. She also claims that she would have chosen a radically different path in handling the health crisis. She says that she would have closed the borders and would have introduced an enhanced and continuous analysis of sewage to predict clusters.¹⁷



Figure 3: Consecutive Covid waves in France, by the number of hospitalisations,

Source: Le Journal des Femmes Santé¹⁸

Immigration and security

Immigration and the related concern of security are presented at the heart of this presidential campaign as French society fears that immigration has gone out of hand in the country. On the question of immigration Jean-Luc Mélenchon proposes the suspension of the Dublin agreement, which regulates and coordinates immigration policies within the EU. He says that this agreement allows member states to send immigrants back to the countries they first entered the EU instead of assuming responsibility. In his programme he promises to reinforce the right to asylum and accelerate the asylum process as much as possible.¹⁹ Anne Hidalgo as leader of the Socialist Party supports integration over assimilation, but she also calls for bigger

control over the migration influx to France. She wants to humanise migration and ask for greater cooperation within the EU so that deaths on the Mediterranean and in the Channel can be prevented. This cooperation would also entail the just repatriation of refugees among EU member states, yet repatriation is also on her table in the case of those immigrants who do not obtain their papers to stay from French authorities.²⁰

Immigration and security are traditionally more frequently addressed by right-wing politicians. Most of them, built their entire campaign around this question, as they hope it will win over a great many voters. On the right end of the political spectrum there is Eric Zemmour, who based his very candidature on the promise that he would bring a solution to the immigration issue. In this framework he is not afraid even of using terms like “civilisational war” when describing the domestic security situation. Like Marine Le Pen he also supports the idea of a referendum on migration where questions such as immigration, family re-unification and integration could be decided.²¹ Emmanuel Macron’s position towards migration has changed substantially. At the beginning of his presidency, he started off a pro-immigration president, today he aligns his position more and more to those politicians that called for prudence in opposition to turning a blind eye to irregular mass migration targeting Europe. Now, on the edge of entering this new campaign President Macron would like to engage European partners into enhancing border security in the European Union, moreover, he proposes a reform of the Schengen system as well. He can of course now use the EU Council presidency to shape policies to be advantageous for France. The shift in his attitude towards migration might be attributed to the shift in the society, which looks more and more for a leader able to reinforce security.²²

“Les Républicains” during this last “Quinquennat” have slowly but firmly shifted towards a stance against immigration. As a result, Valérie Pécresse proposes that a quota based on the countries of origin and professions should be introduced. She also wants to strike bilateral agreements with the countries of origin, so that they can be held responsible for not repatriating their citizens, if need be, and reform the asylum process at the end of which those who do not obtain asylum will have to leave the country. The asylum seekers should be placed in centres dedicated to their care until their status is not clarified. The reformed immigration policy would also entail greater control over family reunification cases and the introduction of a new regulation that would prevent those who have not been in France for at least five years from being granted social

welfare. “Les Républicains” today prefer integration to assimilation. Therefore, Mrs Pécresse names a French language course as a condition to the residence permit. She also pledges to replace the ghettos with social housing while limiting the number of non-natives in classes.²³

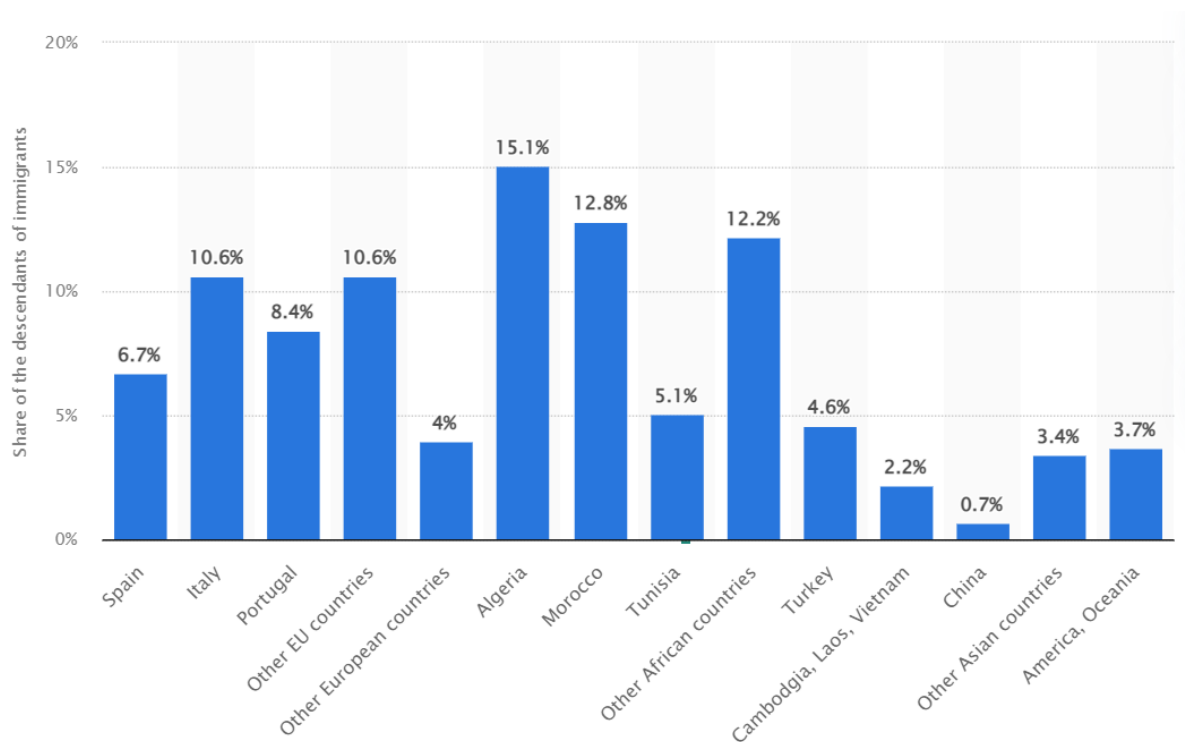


Figure 4: France for decades has been prone to immigration, Source: Statista²⁴

Originally however, it was Marine Le Pen who introduced the issue of immigration into the French public discourse. Today, in her quest to limit migration and protect French identity she proposes a project based on several initiatives. Firstly, she would like to limit social contributions to those households where at least one of the parents is French, secondly only those foreign nationals would be eligible for unemployment benefits who had worked for at least five years in France before becoming unemployed. Moreover, Mrs Le Pen also says that those foreigners that live in France for more than a year without having a job should be expelled. She also wants to restrict the conditions of family reunification and reform the country’s asylum policy. Finally, she sees it best, that the general medical aid provided for everyone on French territories should be replaced by an emergency service. Besides this programme, in

case elected, Marine Le Pen would like to base her immigration policy on the results of a referendum on the matter.²⁵

No other candidate centres their programme more around the question of immigration than Eric Zemmour. He took a hostile position towards migration and also the immigrant population of France, because he claims that neither the programmes aiming assimilation, nor the ones directed to ensure integration were successful enough, therefore he draws the conclusion that immigration as a phenomenon is disruptive for France. In this mindset, he proposes to ban family re-unification and limit the number of asylums the country is allowed to grant a year, moreover he wishes to introduce a fee that countries of origin have to pay before their nationals apply for asylum. He also insists that foreign students should meet strict criteria, before entering French higher education. Zemmour leans towards the idea that France should move away from the “ius soli”, granting citizenship based on the country of birth, and introduce “ius sanguini” which would grant citizenship only to children born to French nationals. Besides he wishes to introduce stark conditions for naturalisations and suspend social aid to non-EU foreigners.²⁶

Climate change

Climate change and the destruction of the global environment grew to be the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Not surprisingly, almost every presidential candidate involves it into their programmes. Jean-Luc Mélenchon to begin with, positions the question of nuclear energy at the heart of his climate programme, namely that he wants to quit nuclear and solve the energy problem otherwise. He judges this form of energy to be too dangerous and he pledged to shut down every plant in France in case he becomes President. He justifies his views by claiming that the modernisation of existing nuclear plants would cost almost EUR 100 billion, therefore investing into green energy would be cheaper.²⁷ He also proposes to amend the constitution with the so called “green rule” which would make it unconstitutional to take more from the environment than what we can reproduce or rehabilitate.²⁸ With regards to the ecology it is difficult for Anne Hidalgo to take a stance without aiding the cause of her green opponent. Yet, she claims that in case she is elected she will establish a ministry responsible for the

climate, the biodiversity and the economy. This way social and sustainable economy could be combined.²⁹ She would like to channel the environmental questions too into a social framework. She initiated that carbon taxes should be reduced. This is how she intends to distinguish herself from the green candidate Yannick Jadot by assuring the most fragile social groups that environmental protection will not be done on their expenses. Instead of using individual cars she says the population should be encouraged to use public transport.

Environmental issues are of course the crown jewels of the programme of the green presidential candidate Yannick Jadot. In this frame he advocates to put an end to industrial farming and put a greater emphasis on country farmers instead. Moreover, it is his intention to introduce an environment clause into the logic of public spending. Those who do not align with this new rule will not be eligible to government subsidies. He also announced that he will cut government investments into Total, France's oil giant. Still on the environment he initiated that tax on bio products should be waved not only in France but in the whole of the EU.³⁰

Most interestingly climate issues barely had a role in Emmanuel Macron's 2017 campaign. As time went by, he realised nonetheless, that environmental deterioration is one of the greatest challenges of our day, as a result, he started to incorporate the question ever more into his policies. Sustainable development is at the heart of the "France Relance" economic programme and France during this "Quinquennat" emerged as a crucial protector of the environment. Paris is one of the flagships carrying the European Green Deal and the French government does a lot in order to ensure that Europe becomes climate neutral by 2050. President Macron will surely incorporate the 2050 climate neutrality goal into his programme in addition to the energy security question. In the frame of this latter, he will surely advocate for the wider usage of nuclear energy that, according to him, could replace fossil fuels in the future as they are more reliable than the renewable sources of energy (wind, solar, hydraulic).³¹

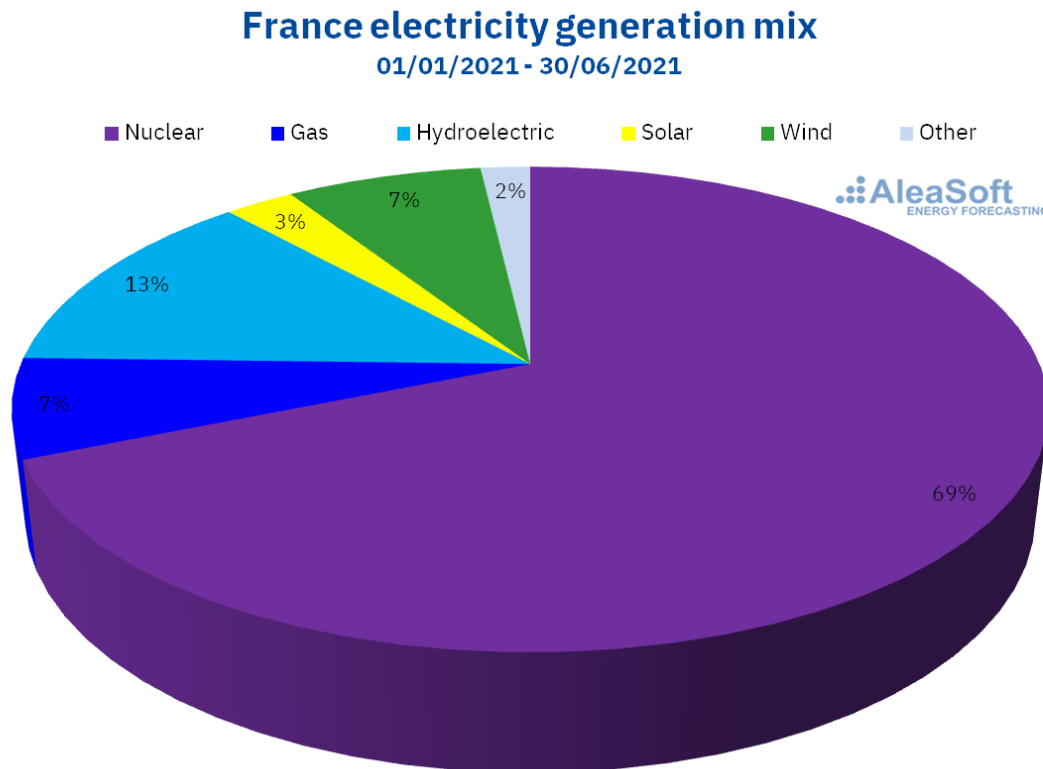


Figure 5: France’s electricity production strongly relies on nuclear energy, Source: Alea Soft Energy Forecasting³²

Even if protection of the environment was not one of the core elements of the Republican campaigns during previous elections, now Valérie Pécresse has put a great emphasis on this issue. She proposes to mobilise every element of the French economy in order to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. On the EU level, she proposes a carbon tax to be introduced at the common borders, this way she wants to avoid social and environmental dumping. What is more she supports the idea of channelling the carbon requirement into trade agreements the EU might make. On the issue of climate change, she focusses on the reform of public transportation by recommending that all fossil fuelled vehicles should be replaced by clean energy fuelled ones. Her objective is, that by 2035 all new vehicles use clean energy, for this the related industry in France should be incentivised. Mrs Pécresse also announced that she wishes to cooperate with the civil sector when it comes to the protection of natural patrimony.³³

Besides the referendum on immigration candidate of the “Rassemblement National”, Marine Le Pen proposes a referendum to be held on the issue of ecology as well. This referendum would ask the French of their opinion of nuclear energy - which she

supports, wind energy - which she rejects and even the creation of shopping centres - which she also refuses. However, she supports the idea of improving the isolation of the French housing park she would not make it obligatory for those who could not afford it.³⁴ For Eric Zemmour on the other hand, the climate issue is the same as the demographic issue, namely the overpopulation of the African and Asian continents. He straightforwardly opposes the inscription of the protection of the environment into the national constitution as he says climate change is not something the French can stop on their own.³⁵

Conclusion

Beyond the several domestic issues there are also international challenges too, but as a rule they do not define the outcomes of elections. Nevertheless, it is true that in 2017 being a pro-European significantly contributed to the final success of the current president Emmanuel Macron. As for foreign policy approaches, Jean-Luc Mélançon advocates for a French exit from the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and wishes for the exit from the EU too. Similarly, Eric Zemmour would like France to leave the eurozone and return to its national currency the franc. He sees this move as essential on the route to take back national sovereignty.³⁶ Marine Le Pen usually advocates for a Europe of nations as opposed to the enhancement of the supranational line. Moderate left-wing candidates generally are pro-EU, this is accurate in the case of Yannick Jadot, Anne Hidalgo and Christiane Taubira as well.

All in all, the 2022 presidential campaign reveals two poles forming on the edges of French society. Liberal and neo-nationalist forces fight sometimes, even within the communication of one candidate. It is still true that there is a left-right divide in French politics, and their views clash on many issues. While the left pushes for higher market regulation and for a strong role for public authorities, the right would like to avoid these and regulate the actors of the civil society instead. As we could see the left-wing candidates focus more on delivering equality and solidarity by their economic programmes in line with dealing with climate issues, while right-wing candidates want to realise higher competitiveness and lower taxes and protect the national identity and the security of the country.³⁷

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