The Rassemblement National and COVID-19: How Nativism, Authoritarianism and Expert Populism Did Not Pay Off during the Pandemic

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The Rassemblement National and COVID-19: How Nativism, Authoritarianism and Expert Populism Did Not Pay Off during the Pandemic

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Abstract
The article examines the response of the French National Rally (Rassemblement National – RN) to COVID-19. It combines computer-based and qualitative content analysis of Facebook posts and press releases to uncover the salience and frames of the infection. I find that the RN used an ambivalent strategy to respond to the pandemic, linking an unexpected problem to its core ideological tenets, while also adapting its programmatic profile. Specifically, the RN interpreted COVID-19 in terms of immigration and defence. Diagnostic frames drew on nativist, authoritarian and populist tenets to identify the origin of the infection (migrants), and to attribute blame for its spread (lack of border controls). Moreover, prognostic frames used disagreement within the scientific community to criticize governments' policies and propose alternatives. While this strategy allowed the RN to address an issue outside its 'comfort zone', its support base remained stable. These results point at the radical right's strategic use of expert knowledge and populist logics to try to improve its credibility in mainstream public debates.

Keywords: radical right populism; COVID-19; Rassemblement National; Marine Le Pen; France

Commentators have asked whether COVID-19 could 'kill off' or 'breed' populism (see Schroders 2020). Indeed, the societal fears triggered by the pandemic could shift voters away from radical parties and put party leaders under pressure, by forcing them to take a stance on a policy area they had little experience with. Yet, this crisis may also constitute an opportunity for radical right populist parties (RRPPs) to improve their credibility. It could give them the chance to distance themselves from racism and extremism and appear competent outside the 'comfort zone' of public debates over immigration – the issue over which they built their reputation. This dilemma seems particularly relevant for the French National Rally (Rassemblement National – RN):[1] while the party has undergone important transformations and is now one of the key players in France, it remains the most disliked

by voters compared to all other parties in the system, and it is also isolated due to the French parties' persisting policy of non-cooperation (the so-called cordon sanitaire), at least at the national level.[2]

The article explores the RN's responses to the pandemic. It seeks to uncover how the party coped with a public agenda dominated by issues other than migration, and the consequences of the pandemic on the party's popularity. In line with the theoretical remits of this special issue (see the issue introduction: Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022), this study builds on the literatures on the supply-side of the populist radical right (Mudde 2007) and on collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988). This framework helps clarify the role played by the ideological tenets of the RN in the framing of the pandemic, which I believe must be understood in the broader process of normalization of the party's public image (the *dédiabolisation* of the RN) (Crépon et al. 2015).

I show that the RN followed an ambivalent strategy to interpret the causes of the pandemic (*diagnostic frames*) and to advance possible remedies (*prognostic frames*). On the one hand, it tried to bend the unexpected scenario to its own ideology, linking an emerging social problem to pre-existing ideas. On the other, it was also able to adapt its programmatic profile to the new scenario. The first strategy implied developing a coherent view on an issue with which the party had little experience. To this goal, the RN drew on its nativist worldview to identify the origins of the public health emergency with the arrival of migrants, and it built on authoritarianism to blame the spread of the virus on the French and EU executives' unwillingness to enforce strict border controls. The second strategy sought to confer the party credibility in proposing alternative policy solutions. Confronted with a public domain largely structured by scientific expertise, the RN combined expert knowledge and populist logics, using expert opinions from dissenting members of the scientific community (considered distant from the executive) to justify its proposals. Hence, if diagnostic frames used classic ideological arguments to challenge the political mainstream, prognostic ones used a new form of 'expert populism' to gain access to mainstream public debates.

The analysis rests on a mixed-methods approach to study the RN's political discourse and its popularity between January 2020 and April 2021. The results show that the RN responded later than governing parties to the COVID-19 outbreak, with an ambivalent framing strategy that did not pay off in terms of popularity, at least in the short run. Yet, they also suggest that the RN was able to adapt to a largely new scenario and innovate enough to communicate with mainstream audiences. In this sense, the study helps to shed light on the ongoing reconfiguration of the populist radical right beyond the case of France. On the one hand, it illustrates the ability of RRPPs to adapt to unexpected events and issues other than the ones they usually politicize. On the other hand, it suggests that these political forces are increasingly capable of integrating scientific expertise within their programmatic profile and engage in mainstream public debates.

The article begins by discussing the literature on the supply side of RRPPs and collective action frames to lay down the theoretical framework. The following section introduces the research design and the method of analysis. Then I present the results illustrating the heuristic interest of my argument, before discussing the implications of the findings against the backdrop of the transformations of the RRPPs' supply in contemporary democracies.

Theoretical framework: the Rassemblement National and COVID-19

To study the RN's responses to the pandemic, this article combines two strands of literature: research on the supply side of RRPPs (Mudde 2007) and collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988). While scholars of the radical right have shown the crucial role of ideological tenets for the politicization of the main issues that these parties brought into political competition, research on framing helps understanding how collective actors address problems falling outside their usual competences. By combining these two strands of literature, I intend to shed light on what happens to the populist radical right when new issues enter the public agenda, which seems most appropriate in the framework of the current pandemic. In fact, COVID-19 was a game-changer for the content of public debates worldwide. In a few weeks, the spread of the virus profoundly reshaped public priorities, forcing all political parties, including radical right ones, to take a stance on issues associated with public health.

Since the pioneering work by Piero Ignazi (1992), scholars studying the supply side of RRPPs have focused on ideological factors, arguing that nativism, authoritarianism and populism inform these parties' views of society and public problems (Mudde 1999: 199; 2007). Defined in the introduction of this special issue (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022), these three ideological tenets help RRPPs to interpret social reality, delineating imagined borders between the members of the national community and their perceived enemies (Rydgren 2008; van Hauwaert 2019). Between the 1980s and 1990s, the radical right systematically mobilized on issues that had been ignored by governing parties, often playing the role of the challenger within the political system (De Vries and Hobolt 2020) and gaining traction by campaigning around a deep mistrust in mainstream parties and their policy records (Arzheimer 2018; van Kessel 2015).

Still, situations such as the COVID-19 outbreak may change this scenario, with RRPPs no longer bringing their favoured topics into the debate but having to decide whether to engage on issues that fall outside their 'comfort zone'. While they had an interest in avoiding health issues, as these did not directly resonate with their ideology, I anticipate that RRPPs ultimately picked up this debate. This could be because they found themselves forced to take up the issues brought about by the health crisis. In this respect, similar to the mechanism of focusing events, the pandemic could have simply changed the dynamics of political competition, catalysing public debates on a limited set of issues (Green-Pedersen 2019). Alternatively, it could be because they wanted to acquire greater legitimacy in mainstream debates and thus reconfigured their campaigns in line with available discursive opportunities (Shields 2015). Previous scholarship suggests that this has been the case with major crises in the past, notably the Great Recession (Rovny and Polk 2020), which led all parties, including the RN, towards engaging on the economy and welfare (Ivaldi 2015).

To understand how political actors address issues that do not directly resonate with their worldviews, one must consider collective action *frames*: the way in which the actors interpret social problems (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974; Snow and Benford 1988). If ideologies correspond to a group's shared belief and a unified answer to social problems (Swidler 1986), frames are the strategic

devices that articulate, amplify and transform these beliefs to achieve a specific political goal (Beck 2013). Framing strategies refer to the active effort of an actor to construct a certain meaning for a given phenomenon, by emphasizing particular aspects on which to fix the public's attention, while obscuring alternative ones (Dolezal et al. 2010). Frames thus help political actors to interpret complex issues in ways that are 'intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents' (Snow and Benford 1988: 198), which is why scholars distinguish between the cognitive processes that identify the causes of a public problem (diagnostic framing) and those that lead to formulating solutions (prognostic framing; cf. Snow and Benford 1988).

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 health emergency, RRPPs found themselves confronted with interpreting an issue on which they did not have a distinctive programme. In this respect, I envisage two alternative framing strategies. On the one hand, RRPPs could try to bend the pandemic to their core ideological themes because they expect that this would benefit them via the issue ownership advantage they enjoy when debates deal with migration and law and order (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Petrocik 1996). This would mean framing the pandemic in ways that resonate with nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. On the other, they could link the pandemic to other issues and explanations, taking the opportunity of the crisis to break into the mainstream consensus and escape the role of marginalized challengers. This would translate into a framing strategy resonating with the main features of a debate dominated by arguments rooted in scientific expertise and civic responsibility.

Overall, to interpret the RRPPs' responses to the pandemic, one ought to investigate first the amount of attention that they attributed to COVID-19 and related health issues (salience), and then look at the specific ways in which they made sense of the causes of, and solutions to, the crisis (diagnostic and prognostic frames).

Research design

The paper follows a case study design and a mixed-methods approach to examine the reactions of the RN to the pandemic in France, from January 2020 to April 2021, in terms of salience and frames of COVID-19.

The RN and the evolution of the pandemic in France

The RN offers a valuable case study to understand RRPPs' responses to the pandemic, thanks to its peculiar role in the French political system. It is one of the oldest and most successful radical right parties in Europe that never accessed national government.[3] And yet, since Marine Le Pen (MLP) took over the leadership in January 2011, she has been working on a strategy of normalization, seeking to change the RN's status as political pariah (Crépon et al. 2015: 13–14). To escape marginalization, the party adopted a strategy combining radical stances on migration and security, and a more credible and professionalized public image that led it to become the second political force in France (Alduy and Wahnich 2015; Surel 2019). In this respect the case of the RN is particularly suited to study the responses
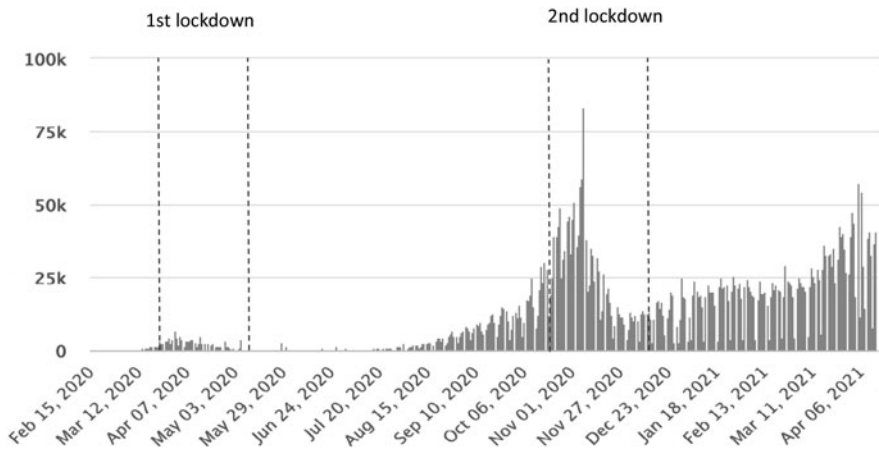
Figure 1. COVID-19 Novel Daily Cases in France and Containment Measures
Source: https://coronavirus.jhu.edu.

to the pandemic by RRPPs, as the French party had an interest in playing both the role of radical challenger appealing to voters via its traditional anti-immigration rhetoric, and that of credible opposition party (Ivaldi 2019; Mayer 2018).

France was one of the first European countries to be hit by the pandemic. The virus made its first appearance in public debates on 24 January 2020, when Minister of Health Agnès Buzyn of the Republic on the Move party (REM, La République en Marche) reported the first two cases of patients. In the next days, a religious gathering in Mulhouse (close to the German border) brought together 2,000 people and was at the origin of serial transmission throughout the territory. As the infection spread, the government responded swiftly with strict measures. According to the Oxford Stringency Index (Hale et al. 2021) recording the strictness of government policies to counter the pandemic worldwide, France is among the European countries where containment measures (notably *confinement* or lockdown) have been particularly tight for the entire period of analysis (see Online Appendix, Annex 1). Figure 1 shows the evolution of the pandemic in France in 2020 and the implementation of two main waves of containment measures. A third wave followed between 3 April and 3 May in 2021 (not shown in figure).

The first lockdown measures followed the approval of the law on health emergency (Légifrance 2020) and were enforced from 23 March to 11 May 2020. In the entire French territory, going out without an authorized reason was forbidden. Individuals were required to carry a self-declared authorization specifying the purpose of leaving home, with authorizations being possible only for specific paths: between home and essential work, essential stores (such as supermarkets and pharmacies), essential medical appointments or the hospital, to another home to assist family in need, or for physical exercise (for no more than one hour per day) and within a maximum radius of 1 kilometre from home.[4] After the summer, infections rose sharply and on 29 October 2020 President Macron (REM) announced a second national lockdown that lasted from 30 October to 15 December 2020.[5] After the lifting of these measures in December 2020, France began a daily

20.00–06.00 curfew that was not waived even on New Year's Eve. As the number of infections did not decrease significantly, on 3 April 2021 the government initiated a third wave of containment measures that lasted until 3 May including notably a 19.00–06.00 curfew.

France's coronavirus vaccination programme got off to a slow start on 27 December 2020. Priority was given to nursing homes and subsequently expanded to those most likely to develop severe forms of the disease (those aged 75 and over, healthcare givers and medical social workers). The campaign took place amid pressure from rising coronavirus infections (see Figure 1) and the threat of new mutations that made it more transmissible. France's slow start has been blamed on two main factors: first, bureaucracy in the country's vaccination procedure, notably errors in the guidelines transmitted to nursing homes (Bergeron et al. 2020); second, public distrust of immunization programmes (Bristielle 2020; Schwarzinger and Luchini 2021; Ward et al. 2020). Indeed, while intentions to vaccinate fluctuated a lot during the pandemic and the French population displayed the highest levels of vaccination intent in spring 2021, when people were asked if they would agree to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in November 2020, only around 50% answered that they would probably accept or certainly accept (against more than 80% in India, China, Brazil and more than 60% in Germany and Italy) (IPSOS 2021).

During the first year of the pandemic and the vaccine rollout, the executive underwent major reshuffles. Despite his popularity, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe (REM) was replaced by Jean Castex, a career civil servant from the centre-right. The announcement came after the June municipal elections, when Philippe was re-elected mayor in his Normandy bastion of Le Havre.

Data and methods

The analysis focuses on public debates – that is, the open discussion about all ideas and feelings relevant to politics (Bennett and Entman 2001: 3) – which in contemporary audience democracies are carried mostly through the mass media (Roggeband and Vliegenthart 2007: 527; Stier et al. 2020) and social media (Schroeder 2018). Accordingly, the empirical analysis rests on a mixed-methods approach built up in three interrelated steps. First, I use a computer-based analysis of social media content to measure the salience of COVID-19 in the Facebook posts of political parties, which allows me to measure the attention attributed to this issue, and related policy areas. Second, I complement this data with press releases and analyse the data qualitatively in terms of two crucial cognitive components: diagnostic and prognostic framing. Finally, a third step assesses the popularity of RN based on electoral and public opinion data.

The first step rests on a computer-based content analysis of the Facebook posts published by all major political parties in France (see Online Appendix, Annex 2 and 3), between 1 January 2020 and 30 April 2021 collected in the framework of the project 'What Do the People Want? (see Online Appendix, Annex 3). While online trends do not necessarily mirror offline ones, the granularity of Facebook data allows us to map the systemic evolution of public debates daily, trends that could be difficult to grasp from other data sources.[6] As the automated scraping

resulted in too many posts, to filter the material that is relevant for the analysis I performed a keyword search[7] and analysed the content of the posts where keywords appeared using a dictionary approach in which a computer counts the proportion of words considered to be indicators of references to various policy areas. I rely on a comprehensive dictionary of around 60 words developed by Lexicoder in the framework of the Comparative Agendas Project (Albugh et al. 2013) adapted to France by the project 'What Do the People Want?' using the policy categories of the French Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2019) that delivered 16 policy areas. Based on this dictionary, I then classify Facebook posts mentioning COVID-19 as either containing or not containing words related to one of the different policy categories (see Annex 3). Facebook has been selected as it is the most widely used social media for political communication in France (Sandré 2019).[8]

The second step of the study integrates a qualitative content analysis of the Facebook posts and of press releases to identify the main diagnostic and prognostic frames of the pandemic by the RN (see Annex 3). Finally, I focus on the consequences of the pandemic on the popularity of the RN, using electoral results at the 2020 municipal elections (www.interieur.gouv.fr) and opinion surveys from IPSOS.[9] While this data does not measure voting intentions, it captures positive attitudes towards political personalities in France for the period covered by the study, providing a good proxy of parties' support.

Results

Following the design of this study, the data analysis is structured in three inter-related steps. First, I assess the RN's response in terms of salience of COVID-19 quantitatively and look at how much attention this issue receives in the Facebook posts by all parties in the French party system. Second, I explore the RN's positions qualitatively, distinguishing diagnostic and prognostic frames. Finally, I overview the consequences of the RN's strategies for its popularity throughout the pandemic.

The salience of the pandemic in the French party system and the RN's response

The first step tackles the question of when, whether, and to what extent the RN engaged in public debates on COVID-19, a public health issue on which the party had little previous experience. To measure the salience of the pandemic and its emergence on the public agenda, I use a count of the word COVID-19 in the Facebook posts published by the RN and compare it to that of five other major parties in France. Figure 2 illustrates the salience of this topic by week (monthly and daily trends are available in Figures A and B, in the Online Appendix).

The figure shows that all major political parties in France, including the RN, have engaged in public debates on COVID-19 on Facebook, albeit with important differences. To begin with, the RN responded to COVID-19 outbreak slightly later – approximately three weeks – than the governing REM, and the two mainstream parties that alternated in government before 2017: the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS) and the Republicans (Les Républicains, LR). Still, the RN's response came earlier than the those from other opposition parties – Unbowed
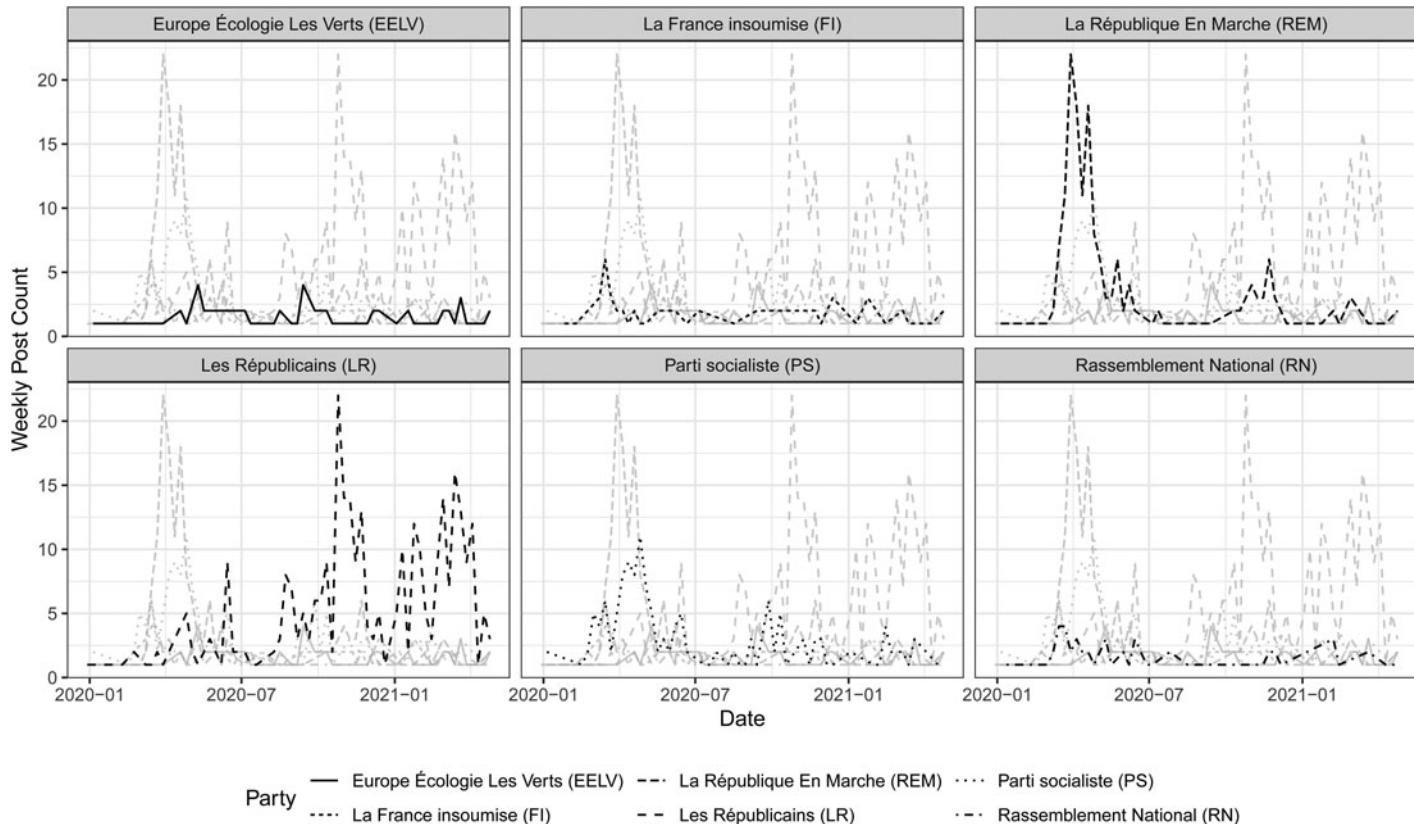
Figure 2. Salience of COVID-19 Facebook Posts in France, by Party
Source: Project 'What Do the People Want? Analyzing Online Populist Challenges to Europe and the US'.
Note: The figure shows the number of Facebook posts mentioning COVID-19, by week.

France (La France Insoumise, FI) and Europe Ecology the Greens (Europe Ecologie Les Verts. EELV). In fact, the RN starts addressing this issue mainly at the same time as the approval of the first lockdown measures in early March 2020. It is important to point out here that Marine Le Pen, unlike other radical right politicians such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, never minimized the danger of COVID-19 (Wondreys and Mudde 2022). On the contrary, she recognized the risks of the pandemic as she was personally affected by the virus in mid-March, and she self-quarantined despite being asymptomatic when she came into contact with a colleague who was found positive for COVID-19. Furthermore, at the aggregate level, the highest salience is found for the governing party REM, followed by the PS and LR. The salience is considerably lower for the RN, but pretty much in line with that of the other opposition parties.

The over-time trend in salience thus confirms, as expected, that the RN was not quick in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, but ultimately picked up an issue outside its usual policy interests. It also appears to have done so only once the debates left the party with no other choice, as almost all media space in France was dedicated to coverage of the pandemic (Bayet et al. 2020). In this respect, the mechanism at stake reflects the one identified by previous studies on focusing events, suggesting that unexpected and relatively sudden happenings tend to catalyse public debates on a limited set of issues and redirect the attention of all parties in the system, including radical ones (Green-Pedersen 2019).

To continue the investigation of the RN's attention profile, I identify the main policy areas that political parties link to COVID-19 in public debates. This is done by focusing on the share of Facebook posts that explicitly mention COVID-19 and look at the main policy issues emphasized therein. This allows us to detect whether, and to what extent, parties highlight issues where the electorate is on their side – that is, where they enjoy 'issue ownership' (Petrocik 1996). For populist parties like the RN, these should be the ones that resonate most with their ideology: immigration and security. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Figure 3 shows that, for all parties, COVID-19 is mainly a matter of public health. While questions related to the management of the public health system have a long history in France, the outbreak of the pandemic placed at the core of public debates the difficult conditions of the country's health workers (Benoît and Hay 2022). Still, the issue-attention profile of the RN shows some important specificities compared to that of the other parties. Unlike mainstream parties, which emphasize the macro-economic dimension of the pandemic, the RN links COVID-19 primarily to issues such as defence/security (40% of the time) and immigration (10%), which instead play a marginal role for all other parties (less than 5%).

These findings suggest that the RN tried to differentiate its attention profile from that of other parties, linking the pandemic to issues on which it had built a reputation over the years. In a similar fashion, the French Green party EELV associates COVID-19 with environmental issues, confirming that an issue-ownership logic may be at work when parties with a niche status are confronted with unexpected events and issues that are relatively new to them. To investigate the positions of the RN in further detail, the next section turns to the qualitative content analysis of the diagnostic and prognostic frames associated with the RN's response to the pandemic.
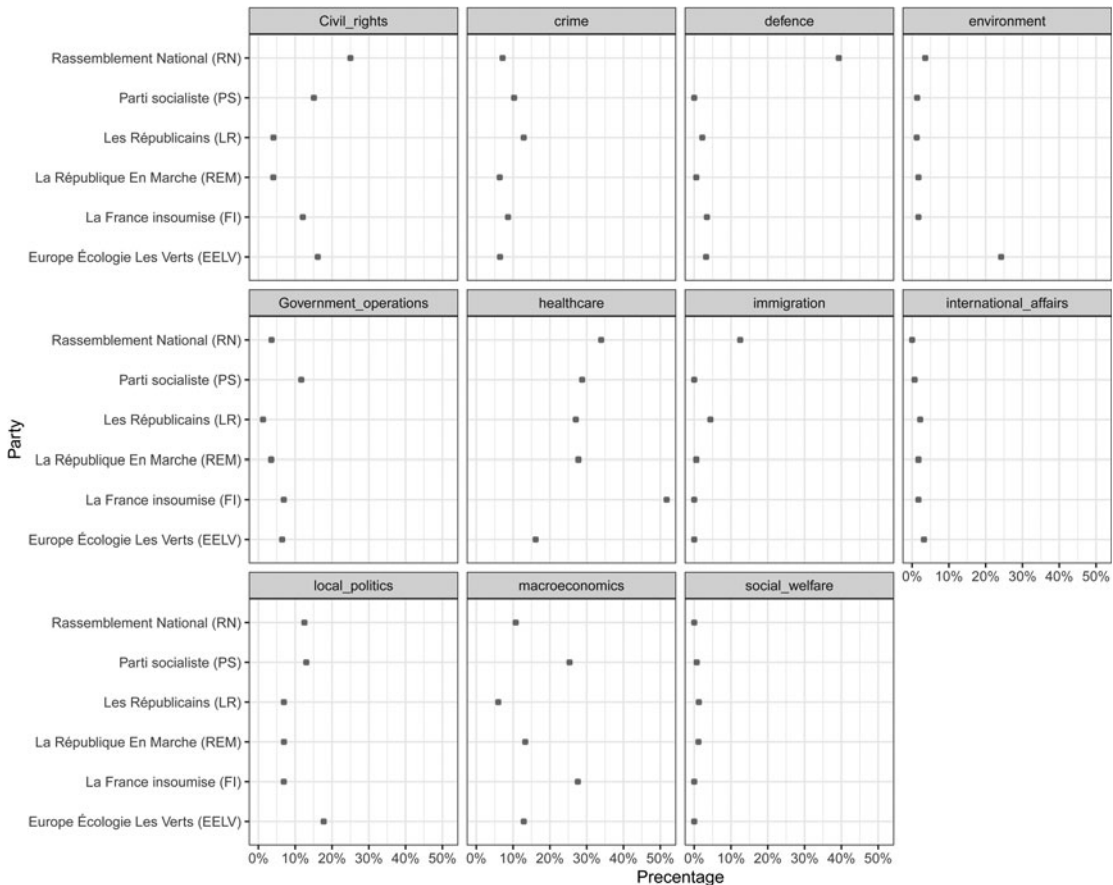
Figure 3. Salience of COVID-19 Facebook Posts in France, by Party and Policy Area
Source: Project 'What do the People Want? Analyzing Online Populist Challenges to Europe and the US'.

Interpreting the pandemic: diagnostic and prognostic frames linking COVID-19 to radical right ideology and 'expert populism'

The qualitative reading of the content of the Facebook posts enables a reconstruction of the main diagnostic and prognostic frames put forward by the RN, which I interpret by integrating data from press releases by Marine Le Pen during the months of the pandemic.

To begin with, I identify three main diagnostic frames which mirror the party's core ideological tenets: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Nativism features prominently in the discourse of the RN about the origins of the pandemic and the causes of its spread. As cases of contagion increased, Marine Le Pen immediately pointed to migrants as the main players responsible for the arrival of the virus in France. Her first official statement took place on social media, where she pointed out that French people's health would be threatened by an influx of outsiders, notably from China (and then Italy), and urged the government to halt flights from these countries.[10] In the following weeks, the party tried to downplay its nativist outlook to contrast the trending hashtag #jenesuispasunvirus (I am not a virus), which denounced mounting racism against people of Chinese origins in France. This led the RN to avoid targeting specific minorities, referring instead to illegal migrants in general, as well as refugees, as potential health threats. Other diagnostic frames were more directly inspired by the party's authoritarian ideological tenets, and thus interpreted the pandemic as the result of permissive border controls (in addition to a lax immigration policy). On multiple occasions, Marine Le Pen urged French president Emmanuel Macron to close all internal and external borders in the Schengen area, claiming that: 'The virus doesn't have a passport, but people who carry the virus do' (Calvi and Douet 2020).

In addition, some diagnostic frames by the RN mirrored its populist understanding of society and blamed the spread of the virus on the French elites and EU representatives. At the national level, the RN contraposed the health of the French ordinary people to the behaviour of the urban elites in Paris, thus tapping into the crucial centre–periphery cleavage of French politics that the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) mobilizations had brought to the core of public debates in the months preceding the COVID-19 outbreak (Algan et al. 2018; Cointet et al. 2021). Accordingly, Marine Le Pen pointed to the inability of domestic political representatives to counter the spread of the virus, accused the government of being unclear in its prevention instructions, and attacked the president for informing citizens too little, and too late (Terrel 2021). At the EU level, the RN blamed the cosmopolitan elites in Brussels (Audureau 2020), with Marine Le Pen declaring that the pandemic had proven 'the strength of the ideology, religion of non-borderism [*sansfrontièrisme*] of the leaders of the EU' (Berretta 2020). This echoes the results of previous studies suggesting that the Euroscepticism of the RN is embedded in a broader framework opposing 'patriots' to so-called 'globalists' (*mondialistes*) (Lorimer 2020a, 2020b). In this respect, a distinctive set of diagnostic frames by the RN reproduced the narratives about 'globalist elites', supranational organizations and pharmaceutical companies having orchestrated the diffusion of the virus. Notably, at the onset of the pandemic, Marine Le Pen voiced concerns about the origins of the virus and did not exclude the possibility that it could

have originated in a biolab. She declared that it was 'a question of common sense' (Pelletier 2020) that people wondered about this possibility, even if she did not have an opinion on this. This public statement came just after the publication of a survey showing that 40% of RN supporters endorsed the theory of a laboratory accident. Similar arguments were subsequently toned down in the discourse of the party.

Moving to the prognostic frames of the pandemic, the qualitative analysis suggests that they are not solely rooted in the party's populist worldview, which the RN mobilized to criticize government policies and to suggest possible ways out from the crisis. Three crucial prognostic frames stand out: one concerning the use of masks to counter the spread of the virus, another the implementation of lockdown measures, and the last on the vaccine rollout. On the one hand, and unlike many other RRPPs in Europe and beyond, the RN had very coherent stances in favour of compulsory mask wearing. On various occasions, Marine Le Pen asked the so-called 'no-masks' to respect the instructions, because 'in the absence of other measures, of vaccine, wearing masks is one of the only ways that can prevent an increase in contamination' (*Ouest France* 2020a). At least in the first months, this was mainly due to the party's willingness to oppose the French government's rules, which did not enforce mask wearing until July 2020. In April, the RN criticized the spokesperson of the executive who claimed that there was 'no scientific consensus' about the usefulness of mask wearing in open spaces (Franceinfo 2020); it accused the government of spreading inconsistent information (de Boissieu 2020), and blamed it for the decision to outsource mask production outside France which led to the shortage in the supply of face masks in the country (Mermilliod 2020). On the other hand, the RN was very inconsistent about lockdown and vaccine policies (Sulzer 2020). On multiple occasions, Marine Le Pen claimed that the lockdown measures in France were a failure and a waste of resources that could be invested to 'give masks to everyone, or set up tests and tracking cases' (*Ouest France* 2020b). Sometimes, the measures were considered too harsh (for example, when it came to places of worship, small shops and bars), whereas other times they were criticized for not being harsh enough (such as those applied to high schools and lyceums) (*Ouest France* 2020b). Yet again, the party also asked for 'localized' measures of full lockdown, to be applied in specific neighbourhoods, cities or regions (Fortunato et al. 2021). At the same time, Marine Le Pen also declared that she would not download the government-sponsored app to trace infections (StopCovid, then TousAntiCovid), arguing that the system would infringe individual freedom (*Le Point* 2020a). Similarly, the RN maintained an ambiguous position on the vaccine. While the RN did not endorse blatant vaccine scepticism (*Le Figaro* 2020), it endorsed a sort of radical libertarianism, positing that French citizens should have the right to decide whether to get the vaccine and should be free to choose which one (*Le Figaro* 2020). Notably, the party leader voiced open distrust of the AstraZeneca vaccine, after it came under suspicion of causing rare but serious blood clots. In April 2021, however, Marine Le Pen declared that she would take the AstraZeneca vaccine if it was offered (Sotto 2021). Furthermore, she argued that the fact that some French people refused to be vaccinated with AstraZeneca was due to the major logistical failure of the French government, which left to the EU the responsibility to handle health policy, a field outside the competencies of the Union (Franceinfo 2021).

In addition to the responses to government action, a distinctive set of prognostic frames by the RN developed a form of 'expert populism', combining the logics of scientific expertise with a Manichean view contraposing the science of the people and that of the elites. By seizing non-radical dissenting opinions in the scientific community, the RN sought to present itself as a party just like the others; by taking side with scientists excluded by the National Scientific Council (NSC) appointed by the government to advise on the management of the crisis, the party preserved its anti-establishment trademark.

Specifically, the prognostic frame strategy of the RN took advantage of existing disagreement within the scientific community, which in the French context set the NSC, based in Paris and closely associated with the government, in opposition to the Marseille-based virologist Didier Roault, whom the RN associated with the people. Expert populism informed the scepticism of the RN towards official health recommendations, notably by the NSC (*La Provence* 2020). In doing so, rather than contrasting scientific knowledge *tout court* or blatantly endorsing so-called fake news as other populist leaders did, the RN leadership systematically used figures, polls and epidemiologic data produced by well-known scientists outside the NSC to criticize the policies set out by the executive. According to Marine Le Pen, President Emmanuel Macron had in fact infantilized the French (*Ouest France* 2020c), hiding the real figures about the pandemic to justify inadequate policy solutions. Indeed, Marine Le Pen advocated for data-driven vaccination policies (*Ouest France* 2020d) and attacked the government for 'incorrectly counting the number of deaths' (Mella 2020). This framing strategy also characterized the position taken by Marine Le Pen concerning the controversial proposal to use a common antimalarial drug (chloroquine) to cure coronavirus, which was advanced by maverick virologist Didier Raoult among much media clamour. While Marine Le Pen did not openly endorse this proposal, she used this controversy strategically to attack the government. At first, she asked the government to allow physicians to 'prescribe chloroquine for "mild" coronavirus symptoms' (Michelon 2020) and subsequently insisted that if the government was hiding the fact that chloroquine was effective against COVID-19 'we have here the elements of a real major health scandal' (*Le Point* 2020b).

The popularity of the RN during the pandemic

In sum, the qualitative analysis reveals that the RN followed an ambivalent strategy to address the pandemic. While the party responded late to the COVID-19 outbreak and tried to bend the coronavirus emergency to its radical worldviews, it also sought to present itself as a credible and competent actor by combining expert knowledge and populist logics. To investigate the extent to which this strategy was successful, I look at the consequences of the crisis on the popularity of the party. If data on the electoral support for the RN are still limited, I can in fact flesh out some more general trends based on the results of the municipal elections that took place in March and June 2020, and opinion surveys run throughout the whole year. The results show that the RN did not capitalize on the health crisis, as already noted before (Baloge and Hubé 2021), but the pandemic confirmed the popularity that Marine Le Pen had acquired over the last years. In fact, the RN maintained a

Table 1. Positive Attitudes towards Political Personalities in France, by Party Affiliation and Government Status (%)

	Positive opinion (%)											
	2020								2021			
	Feb	Mar	Apr	July	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Mar	Apr	Diff. (Feb 2020–Apr2021)
Government status												
Government												
The Republic on the Move												
Emmanuel Macron (pres.)	30	38	38	39	40	40	37	38	35	41	37	7
Edouard Philippe (PM)	29	42	41	56	54	54	55	56	51	53	54	25
Jean-Castex (PM)				33	37	35	31	36	32	36	32	−1
Opposition												
Socialist Party												
Olivier Faure	12	15	13	14	14	11	12	12	12	14	12	0
The Republicans												
Christian Jacob	12	16	18	15	14	14	15	16	16	16	13	1
Europe, Ecology the Greens												
Yannick Jadot[a]	20	25	21	22	20	20	18	17	18	16	16	−4
National Rally												
Marine Le Pen	28	28	29	28	28	28	30	31	30	32	32	4
Unbowed France												
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	22	22	23	21	22	21	21	23	22	22	21	−1
French Communist Party												
Fabien Roussel	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Note: [a]Data not available for the secretary of the party, Julien Bayou.

relatively stable support base throughout the pandemic, and its leader was confirmed as one of the best-evaluated political figures in the country.

The 2020 municipal elections confirmed the stability of the RN support base. Elections took place in approximately 35,000 communes, including Paris, amidst mounting fears of infection.[11] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the elections registered a record number of abstentions, with more than 50% of the voters deserting the ballots (an increase of about 20 points on the previous elections of 2014). Despite the low turnout, the RN registered a slight improvement compared to the previous elections: if in 2014 the party had elected around 1,550 councillors across the country, winning 12 cities with more than 1,000 inhabitants (notably Béziers; see Evans and Ivaldi 2020), in 2020 it managed to retain eight of these cities, winning in another six and in the larger city of Perpignan. A similarly nuanced trend emerges from the more granular data on the popularity of Marine Le Pen, as measured by IPSOS opinion data on positive attitudes towards political personalities in France. Throughout the year, the RN leader remained the third most popular political figure in France, after President Macron and the prime minister – that is, the most popular politician not in office.

Table 1 summarizes the results from IPSOS, dividing French politicians by party affiliation and by their government status, showing that the RN gained some support during the crisis, albeit modestly (4% between February 2020 and April 2021), while Marine Le Pen remained highly popular. At the onset of the crisis, 28% of the French citizens interviewed in this poll expressed a positive assessment of Marine Le Pen, a figure that remained stable until the beginning of the second pandemic wave in autumn 2021, when the popularity of the RN leader increased slightly. The table shows, instead, a considerable support for President Macron and the prime ministers (REM), which would confirm that coronavirus triggered a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect. From February to September the REM leaders went from around 30% to 40% positive opinion in the polls. Most other opposition parties either experienced small losses (EELV) or remained stable (PS and FI).

Discussion and conclusions

The outbreak of COVID-19 placed the radical right in a strategic dilemma. It offered to these political forces the opportunity of playing the role of radical challengers, appealing to voters via their traditional anti-immigration rhetoric, as well as the option to act as credible opposition parties. This dilemma has been particularly important for the populist radical right in France, as the RN has been struggling for years to improve its public image. Building on the literature on the supply side of RRPPs and collective action frames, this study assessed the RN's responses to the pandemic, in terms of the salience attributed to the health issues, and the frames used to interpret its causes and to propose solutions. Specifically, I aimed to answer the three driving questions of this special issue.

First, how has the RN responded to the pandemic? The analyses show that the RN did not withdraw from public debates outside its 'comfort zone', but it tried, when possible, to associate the health emergency with other issues that are closely tied to its ideological worldviews and on which the party has built its reputation and expertise, notably immigration and defence and security.

Second, how has the RN framed the pandemic? The results illustrate that the RN interpreted the origins of the pandemic (diagnostic frames) leveraging on its classical ideological tenets, linking the virus to immigration and security issues. In contrast, the interpretation of how to handle the virus (prognostic frames) was informed by Marine Le Pen's project to normalize the party. This explains why the RN seized public disagreement among experts to showcase alternative and incoherent policy proposals, notably on containment measures and vaccination but kept a coherent position in favour of mask wearing. Unlike other RRPPs for whom the pandemic was yet another occasion to spread disinformation, the RN progressively distanced itself from arguments that COVID-19 had escaped from a lab in China, and used the pandemic as an opportunity to further foster its normalization efforts and achieve credibility in mainstream politics.

Third, what have been the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of the RN? As I have shown, this ambivalent framing strategy had little impact on the popularity of the RN, which did not lose out during the pandemic-driven rally around the flag, but it did not cash in on the government mistakes either. Overall, the results from France suggest that even under exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the issues at the core of the campaigns of the RN have been relatively marginalized in public debates, the party tends to approach public debates in Manichean terms, contraposing elite interpretations (notably those of the executive and of the NSC) to those of the people (such as the ones by scientists who disagreed with the policies proposed in Paris). This notwithstanding, in the case of the RN, opposing the elites did not imply blatantly endorsing conspiracy theories or other anti-scientific fake news, which would reduce the credibility of a party primarily interested in presenting itself as a party like all the others.

This study is largely supportive of previous results on the reconfiguration of the supply side of some RRPPs during crisis situations, including the RN (Lorimer 2020a; Mayer 2018). Importantly, however, I add to existing knowledge the indication that in framing the politics of the pandemic, the RN relied on experts' knowledge to present itself as a 'professional' and 'competent' party, able to address (complex) issues outside its flagship ones. For these reasons, I believe that this article has broader implications for the study of the reconfiguration of populist radical right parties, beyond the case of France. It illustrates RRPPs' ability to adapt to unexpected events and issues other than the ones they usually politicize. In addition, it points to the use of expertise in populist discourses, suggesting that these political forces are increasingly capable of seizing public disagreement between experts to engage in mainstream public debates and showcase their credibility. Like progressive populist parties (Bickerton and Accetti 2021), radical right parties may rely on experts to increase their credibility, even if this strategy did not seem to pay off for the RN. Still, it is dangerous to overgeneralize from the case of the RN, without addressing at least two important factors. First, future research might want to include additional data to study the content of public debates covering a longer time span and including data from other social and mass media platforms to account for different phases of the pandemic. More research is also needed on the audiences of radical right social media profiles and their reception of coronavirus frames. Second, offline data on the supply side of political parties on COVID-19 (notably from expert surveys and electoral manifestos) would also

greatly contribute to the assessment of whether online trends mirror offline ones, and to what extent. Only future research addressing these shortcomings can help us understand whether – when it comes to the politicization of issues outside their 'comfort zone' – some radical right parties normalize or radicalize themselves or are barely affected by the changing context.

Notes

1 In this article I use National Front (Front National, FN) or National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN) depending on the period of reference. At the party congress on 11 March 2018, Marine Le Pen proposed renaming the party to National Rally, and on 1 June 2018, the renaming of the party was confirmed, following an 80.81% approval ballot of party members.
2 The situation is different at the local level where there has been more space for formal cooperation. See Paxton and Peace 2021.
3 The FN/RN elected 35 MPs in 1986, 1 in 1997, 2 in 2012, and 8 in 2017.
4 Public gatherings of more than 100 people were also prohibited and cultural spaces including cinemas, theatres and museums had been closed. Visits to retirement homes, which had been hard hit by COVID-19, were also forbidden. Beyond the legal banning enforced through police controls and fines, regular speeches by the French president Emmanuel Macron, the prime minister and the health minister reiterated a moral prescription asking citizens to stay at home as a sign of civic responsibility.
5 Schools remained opened – from kindergartens to high schools – and a new exemption trip certificate was planned for pupils heading to school and for parents walking and/or driving them. Although universities continued to operate, they remained physically shut – except for exams – and all lectures were held online. Likewise, some activities were granted an exemption and could remain active, including the building industry and small shops. In the cultural sector, film and theatre workers could continue rehearsals as well as film shoots and studio music recordings. In addition, the fine for breaking the lockdown was revised and parks and places of worship remained open.
6 The data were automatically extracted via CrowdTangle in accordance with the EU GDPR regulation.
7 I use COVID-19 as the keyword.
8 Since I wanted to employ sources that were as comparable as possible across parties, I opted for Facebook. However, it should be acknowledged that, unlike other political leaders, the communication strategy of Jean-Luc Mélenchon mostly relied on the use of YouTube.
9 I use the Baromètre politique IPSOS. See www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/barometre-politique.
10 https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1222408511486861312?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1222408511486861312%7Ctwgr%5E&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F; d'Adhémar et al. (2020).
11 According to IFOP, no less than 55% of French voters said they had abstained because they were worried about coronavirus.

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