

The Role of Economic Narratives in Right- versus Left-Wing Populism: The Case of France

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ABSTRACT

In the context of financial crises, the French 2022 Presidential elections have featured powerful economic narratives, embedded in the populist rhetoric of the presidential candidates Marine Le Pen (right-wing) and Jean-Luc Melenchon (left-wing). By examining the construction of economic narratives in their campaign speeches, this thesis questions the distinction between right- and left-wing populism that is prominent in the literature, where left-wing is strongly associated with economics, while right-wing discourse is attributed to the culture. Drawing on a comparative narrative analysis of Le Pen's and Melenchon's rhetoric in the electoral campaign, this thesis argues that economics is the most salient feature of both right- and left-wing populist discourse. The analysis showcased that Le Pen and Melenchon have deployed economic grievances and crises to construct the 'black and white' storyline of 'the people' versus 'the elites'. In this story, Le Pen and Melenchon represent themselves as heroes, who contrary to the villains (the elites) offer a better future to the French. This research contributes to the field by arguing that economics is indeed a unifying element in both right- and left-wing populist discourse. As a result, this thesis draws attention to the importance of narratives in populist rhetoric, as means to mobilize the masses via persuasion of the need for major changes.

Keywords: populism, narrative, economics, 'black and white', 'the people' vs 'the elites', heroes, villains, major changes

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	I
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	II
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	III
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Puzzle and Research Question	2
Research Justification and Case Study Selection.....	4
CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
1.1 What is Economic Populism?	8
1.2 Economic Narratives in Populism	12
1.2.1 The Role of Economic Narratives in Populist Rhetoric.....	14
1.3 Why France?	15
1.3.1 French Populism: Shift from Left to Populist Left	15
1.3.2 La France Insoumise Rhetoric	17
1.3.3 Right-Wing Populism in France: Front National	18
1.3.4 Front National's Rhetoric	19
CHAPTER 2 - ANALYSIS.....	22
2.1 Methodology	22
2.2 Analysis of the Left-wing Rhetoric.....	23
2.3 Analysis of the Right-wing Rhetoric	28
2.4 Comparative analysis of the left- and right-wing rhetoric	32
CONCLUSION	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39

INTRODUCTION

What role do economic factors play in populism? Is it any different for right-wing vs left-wing populism? According to populism scholarship, globalization and the triple economic crises boosted the fortunes of populist mobilization in Europe. The inequality gap became wider following the economic and technological advancements and the so-called ‘losers’ of globalization fell under the influence of the radical right-populist parties and of left-wing populists who promised to protect them against the threat of openness caused by globalization. Workers who could not adjust to the economic changes found themselves in a state of despair and anger, believing that the political elites have simply betrayed them. Here, the changes in the modes of production also resulted in growing inequality and thus allowed for the advancement of populist economic claims (Orban 2019).

Other scholars have argued that culture explains populism better than economic grievances. According to the cultural backlash hypothesis, the rise in populist party support can be largely attributed to a backlash against progressive cultural change rather than being solely an economic phenomenon (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Norris and Inglehart 2019). This argument is based on the theory of value change known as the “silent revolution”, which contends that the post-war decades featured an intergenerational shift toward post-materialist values like cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 3).

In the literature, populist mobilization differs between right and left-wing populists. Following Mudde's and Kaltwasser's (2013) explanation, right-wing populist rhetoric is structured around nationalistic claims, which argue that foreigners present a ‘threat to the national identity’ and are blamed for overburdening the welfare system. Contrary to that, the scholarship emphasizes that left-wing populists frame their rhetoric around income inequality, positioning the wealthy and the Multinational Corporations (MNCs) as a ‘threat’ (Mudde and

Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Rodrik 2018, Berend 2021). Nevertheless, both left and right-wing populism intended a revolt against the establishment (Berend 2021), which in turn implies a revolt against the global economic order.

Despite the traditional division of left- versus right-wing populism, in the context of contemporary issues and crises, this thesis argues that both left- and right-wing populist discourses feature economic arguments. Thus, economic issues play a crucial role in populist storylines. That is why, based on a comparative case study of French populism, this research aims to illustrate that the contemporary populist narrative construction is framed around the economic grievances of the people. The Manichean worldview that is invoked both by the right and left-wing populists allows them to present the elite as the villain versus the good people. Thus, populists construct their narratives to persuade the people of the need for major changes. In this story, populists are the heroes, the ones who belong to ‘the people’ and the ones who claim to have credible solutions to all the crises.

Puzzle and Research Question

Populism is quite an ambiguous concept, as “no one is quite clear just what it is. It bobs up everywhere but in many and contradictory shapes” (Ionescu et al 1969, 1). However, some consensus has been reached in the literature, namely that every populism definition invokes an antagonistic relationship between the people versus the elites. Following Cas Mudde’s definition, populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2007, 23). Here, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are ‘empty vessels’ – meaning that each populist actor identifies it accordingly; and the call for ‘general will’ is about achieving popular sovereignty (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Populism does not necessarily

rely on charismatic leaders or strategy or political style. At its core, it focuses on ‘how the politics should function’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Thus, according to Kirk Hawkins (2010, 5), fundamental ideas about the nature of politics form the basis of the populist worldview.

Mudde and Kaltwasser argue for the exclusionary (right-wing) versus inclusionary (left-wing) sides of populism. For both variants, populism is a ‘thin’ ideology, incorporating other ‘thick’ ideologies to make sense of the world. In this framework, right-wing is associated with *nativism*, as it identifies ‘the people’ as members of a certain nation and tends to exclude other groups from jobs and welfare benefits (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). By contrast, the left-wing populist rhetoric is defined in more inclusive terms and is associated more with *economics*, as it argues for proper welfare distribution and economic equality (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).

Considering this division, scholars tend to miss the similarities between left and right-wing populism. This leads some of us to the puzzle of why scholarly literature neglects the similarities between the left and right, especially when it comes to economic argumentation. This thesis aims to illustrate that the differences between right and left populism are exaggerated, at least in their rhetoric and to some extent in their prescribed policies.

For the purpose of this study, I will examine how populists mobilize the masses by looking at how economic narratives feature populist discourse in right and left-wing parties in France. The illustrations of the left-right dichotomy in France answer the case research question: *Is economics a unifying element in right and left-wing populist discourse?*

Research Justification and Case Study Selection

The significance of this research lies in the fact that populists have undermined the stability of Europe. By manipulating public fears and utilizing rhetorics of discontent, they have managed to capture the hearts of people across Europe. The literature has distinguished between right- and left-wing populist mobilization. By analyzing the construction of economic narratives in Marine Le Pen's (right-wing) and Jean-Luc Melenchon's (left-wing) discourses, this thesis seeks to illustrate the differences and similarities in populist rhetoric across the political spectrum.

The main reason for choosing France as a case study is that holds the national context constant in investigating right and left populism. Both Le Pen and Melenchon are actively present in the political arena and have recognizable populist rhetoric, embedded in their speeches and campaigns both in France and in the EU. Nevertheless, when it comes to economics, Le Pen invokes a chauvinistic narrative to blame the immigrants for overburdening the welfare system, while Melenchon juxtaposes the hard-working people against the multinational corporations and economic elites. In this context, Mudde's and Kaltwasser's distinction between left and right populism is justifiable. *However, economic narratives are not solely present in the left-wing discourse.* Additionally, scholars like Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that economic populism is a characteristic of only left-wing populist rhetoric in developing states. Nevertheless, the French case shows that the populist right also uses economic arguments. For instance, during the 2022 Presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen successfully avoided charges of having close ties with Putin by downplaying her nativism and focusing instead on her social-populist platform, which prioritized economic nationalism and equitable social protection (Ivaldi 2023).

This case comparison is interesting not only from an academic, but also from a political perspective. Marine Le Pen is considered to be one of the most influential populists in the European arena. Le Pen is known as one of the most influential Eurosceptics in the European Parliament, as a leader of the Identity and Democracy (ID) right-wing party in the European Parliament. Thus, her National Rally party managed to get the majority of the French seats in the EP following the 2019 elections, which illustrates that, at least in the EP, her party is more influential than that of President Macron (Jeudy, 2022a).

LFI is also a strong Eurosceptic party, with its arguments built upon anti-globalization, and anti-free trade rhetoric (Ivaldi 2019). Additionally, in the course of the 2017 Presidential Elections, Jean-Luc Melenchon strongly advocated for FREXIT if the EU Treaties are not renegotiated (Ivaldi 2019). Melenchon argued that the EU imposed a ‘tyranny’ on the French people and that the sovereignty of the people will be restored if they ‘disobey’ EU Treaties (Ivaldi 2019).

Like Melenchon, Le Pen poses a threat to the current functioning of the European Union (EU) mainly because she advocates for the re-establishment of French sovereignty, which can be achieved only if Brussels bureaucrats have no influence on French politics (Le Pen 2017). Previously, within the framework of her 2012 and 2017 Presidential campaigns, Marine Le Pen stressed that monetary enslavement imposed by Eurozone (and mainly Germany) possessed a threat to the country’s sovereignty. She further claimed that BREXIT was the greatest event since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and France should follow the British path (Le Pen 2022d).

Even though Le Pen abandoned her discourse on FREXIT and exit from the Eurozone within the framework of the 2022 Presidential elections, she still advocated against supranationalism and sought to change ‘how things are going’ inside the EU (Le Pen 2022d). By advocating for sovereignty and economic protectionism, she pointed out that France needed

to take back control of the national borders, which had been taken away by the ‘corrupt elite’ against the people’s will (Le Pen 2022).

When it comes to Melenchon, he represents one of the most intriguing case studies of populist leadership, due to the French long history of left-wing radicalism (Chiocchetti 2019). Here, La France Insoumise marks the recent emergence of left-wing populism (Chiocchetti 2019). Thus, according to Chiocchetti (2019, 107), the shift towards left-wing populism happened in the framework of the 2017 Presidential elections, where Melenchon’s campaign “[...] marked a further populist shift from the point of view of rhetoric and organization, as the left/right divide was completely eclipsed by the opposition between people and oligarchy, and a fluid personal movement replaced the more structured coalition of parties of the FdG”.

Last but not least, LFI and RN have achieved outstanding results in the past Presidential elections in 2022, with 23.2% of votes gained by Marine Le Pen and 22% gained by Jean-Luc Melenchon (altogether 45.2% of the votes) (Jeudy 2022b). Despite their ultimate losses in the elections, one cannot deny that almost half of the French population is receptive to populist arguments. This makes Melenchon and Le Pen interesting and important in their own right.

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 1 comprises the literature review. The literature review focuses on the conceptual framework of economic populism and discusses left and right juxtaposition in scholarly literature. The second part of the review lays out a comparison of populist scholars’ arguments on the topic of economic narratives in populist rhetoric. The last section of the literature review provides an overview of the history of La France Insoumise and Front National’s rhetoric. Chapter 2 builds up the analytical part, bringing forward a comparative analysis of the economic narratives from Melenchon and Le Pen’s campaign speeches in the 2022 Presidential elections. The concluding part includes the findings and contributions to the literature.

CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 What is Economic Populism?

In the early 1930s, Latin American scholarship defined populism as a type of *economic policy*, that benefited poor people and aimed at economic redistribution and nationalization of state resources (Madrid 2008, 482). During the Great Depression, immigration from rural to urban areas and a combination of economic hardship, as well as demand for social citizenship facilitated the emergence of populist leaders. One of the most prominent examples is President Juan Domingo Peron in Argentina, who invoked anti-elitist rhetoric against the oligarchy and U.S. imperialism, claiming to pursue popular will (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). While in power, his policies mainly had economic character and included social security, cheap housing, and charitable funds for the poor. He was relying on popular support, and mobilizing the lower class sought to bring them into politics (Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

The second wave of populism in Latin America in the 1990s defined populism *as a political strategy*: “Populism is a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland 2001, 14). This definition characterizes populism as a top-down, personalistic form of mobilization that results in the weakening of representative institutions (Barr 2018). When citizens are fed up with corrupt politicians, opportunistic and charismatic leaders take advantage of a strategy that uses anti-establishment appeals (e.g. corruption, socio-economic rights) or the need for ‘the people’ to challenge the elites (Roberts 1995). These changes in the conceptualization of populism are important for our understanding of the concept and the way economics factors within it. Populists such as Alberto Fujimori (Peru) and Lazaro Cardenas (Mexico) who came to power in the 1990s were neoliberal and argued for a different type of economic policy. For instance,

Fujimori invoked a strategy of ‘politics of antipolitics’, which is a traditional populist tactic in which a leader presents themselves as the personification of national unity in opposition to the corrupt elite. This inhibits the implementation of economic reforms intended to benefit the people (Roberts 1995, 98). Thus, populist policies at that time included right-wing neoliberal economic policies, dissolving the myth that economic populism is based on purely leftist policies. As a result, the rise of neoliberal populists in Latin America in the 1990s showed that populism was not really about economic redistribution but could also support neoliberal economic policies. This led scholars to settle on a thinner definition of populism that focused on electoral strategy.

Scholars began to recognize that populism does not always require a personalistic leader to mobilize the masses strategically through populist appeals. Hence, populism came to be defined as a set of ideas or ideology. Beginning in the 2000s, the literature on populism started to focus on a *thinner definition of populism* (Mudde 2004) that took into account instances from both Latin America and Europe, as well as both right- and left-wing populist governments and parties. Following Cas Mudde's (2004) now dominant definition, populism is a thin-centered ideology, based on the fact that there is an antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, where the populist leader positions himself/herself as the true representative of the general will (*volonté générale*). In this view, populism has a chameleonic nature, as it lacks the core values due to its ‘thin-centredness’ and largely depends on the context to which it appeals (Taggart 2000).

Two additional definitions, *populism as a discourse* and *as a style*, approach populism from different perspectives. There is some interconnectedness between populism as a style notion and the discursive approach. According to Stavrakakis (2017, 527), “Populism is a specific type of discourse which claims to express popular interests and to represent associated

identities and demands (the ‘will of the people’) against an ‘establishment’ or elite.” Similarly, the populist style puts an emphasis on the performance patterns in a number of discursive features, for instance, language utilization, speech acts, written texts, and so on. In addition, populism as a style includes aesthetic and performative elements that focus on the meaning-making of the speech. Those elements include images, self-presentation, body language, design, and ‘staging’ (Moffit 2016, 48).

Several scholars such as Inglehart and Norris (2016) and Rodrik (2018) have addressed populism in terms of the supply-demand relationship in populist mobilization. Inglehart and Norris (2016) suggest that in the populism framework, incentives for mobilization can be divided into two perspectives: economic inequality and cultural backlash, where the former addresses the technological revolution and changes in the workforce, and the latter is the outcome of cultural changes brought by globalization. Rodrik (2018) seeks to explain the supply-demand side factors in populist mobilization. On the demand side, economic inequalities related to income distribution that followed globalization allow for populist support due to feelings of discontent with the political elites (Rodrik 2018). However, Rodrik argues that there is rarely a direct or simple relationship between immigration and feelings of discontent related to economic inequalities or grievances.

In this context, Betz (2015) argues that the inflow of migrants was linked to economic concerns, as they have a negative impact on the local labor market. Thus, Betz (2015) and Orban (2019) emphasize that what is positioned from a nativist perspective is often based on economic anxiety, which is a unifying factor for populist mobilization in both right and left-wing cases since all of them were affected by globalization and economic recessions. Hence, globalization and recessions do not sufficiently explain the tendency to vote for populist

leaders, which is why the analytical section of this study will focus on *economic narrative construction* in populist rhetoric.

As a complement to Betz (2015), Ivaldi and Mazzoleni (2019) argue that even though recently, the scholarship on Right-wing Populist parties (RPPs) started to focus on the economic issues addressed by these parties, there is still a gap in the literature. Right-wing Populist Parties are still associated with culture and Left-wing Populist Parties with economics. Also, there is not enough research on the interconnection of RPPs' economic orientation and cultural values (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020). The authors argue that the relationship between the cultural and economic dimensions is significant when analyzing how populists “construct the notion of ‘the people’ as an economic community with a shared destiny, that is in decline and at risk” (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020, 3).

In contrast to social movements, scholars like Aslanidis (2021) contend that populists claim to speak in the name of the people, in a struggle to reduce the power of unaccountable elites and restore the sovereignty of the vast majority of the people. Thus, he claims that there is no economic agenda here. “Populists can (and have) framed both restrictive and expansionist policies - as well as everything in between-as advancing the interests of the “have-nots” at the expense of the 1 percent” (Aslanidis 2021, 258). The author bases his argument on the fact that actual policy choices made by populists are driven by the momentum, political opportunity, nature of the local economy, global environment, and all the other variables that political actors consider when formulating their plans.

These definitions and approaches to studying populism move us away from traditional understandings of economic populism as a policy. Here, the first wave of populist research focused on left-wing redistributive protectionist populism in Latin America in the 1930s-50s, which mostly focused on protectionism and redistribution for the landless peasants (Dornbusch

and Edwards 1990). Following that, the mainstream literature abandoned the idea of populism as (an economic) policy, and in the 1990s, with the emergence of the right-wing and neoliberal populists, the scholarship moved to a thin-centered definition (away from the policy). However, this thesis argues for the relevance of economic arguments in contemporary left- and right-wing populist rhetoric, contrary to the traditional division of left- and right advocated for by Mudde and Kalwasser and Inglehart and Norris. The next section introduces economic narratives in connection to populism. Following that, I will show these discursive features in the narrative construction of left- and right-wing populist rhetoric in France.

1.2 Economic Narratives in Populism

In populist mobilization, narratives are created to make the storyline credible, and they generally follow the ‘black and white’ pattern, where the populist leader promises a better future compared to the evil elites that exploit the people. “Narratives are the crucial resources that provide people with a template - a scaffolding of sorts - from which to build and structure their own stories as well as understand the stories they hear or see in action” (Smith 2017, 204).

Personal narratives reveal a lot about culture, history, and social intent. They serve as texts of cultural and psychological integration, addressing the socio-cultural as well as psychological needs of the individual (Hammack 2011). Understanding that narrative exists at both the individual and political levels of analysis necessitates an analysis of the political, social, and economic structure within which those processes take place as well as the potential interests which that arrangement may serve (Hammack 2011).

According to Skonieczny (2018), populist narratives are about regaining of power by ‘the people’ over ‘the elites’, which can transform economic issues (such as foreign trade) into powerful tales of betrayal, corruption, tyranny, and loss when applied to policy matters. “Populist narratives overcame a pro-trade, pro-globalization, pro-Trans-Pacific Partnership

campaign by invoking powerful, charged characterizations of who ‘we’ are, who is to blame, and what the future should be, all framed in emotional language” (Skonieczny 2018, 62). As a result, populist rhetoric draws feelings of lack and shame toward blaming others—mostly elites, but also uses immigrants and refugees as scapegoats, and portrays them as taking advantage of others and enjoying it (Skonieczny 2018, 63). Here, Skonieczny (2018, 64) argues that populism can be seen as a narrative itself, as “the core ideas of it are used in story-form to connect a subject (the people versus the elite) theme to a problem (free trade that destroys the middle class) and a resolution (protectionism)”. Consequently, the core elements of populist narratives feature the heroes, the good people, with a populist leader who truly represents them. The people in the story are in an antagonistic relationship with the villain, the established elites, who are trying to exploit the good, hard-working people. In the end, the populist leader is the one who ‘saves’ the good people from the evil elites.

This illustrates that economic narratives are socially constructed elements that populists invoke in their narratives. By constructing narratives based on feelings of discontent and anxiety, populists such as Trump and Sanders represent the past as the outcome of bad elitist decisions, where the ‘good old days’ can come back (fantasy future) if people get to power (e.g. ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan) (Skonieczny 2018). For instance, Trump and Sanders managed to turn Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) ‘into an emotional story of betrayal, subversion, and conspiracy against the people’ (Skonieczny 2018, 70). They utilized emotional trigger words and addressed commonly accepted scapegoats to describe the bad trade policy, which in turn allowed the people to connect their personal experiences with abstract trade policies, ensuring their audiences that they (populists) will create a better, brighter future (Skonieczny 2018).

1.2.1 The Role of Economic Narratives in Populist Rhetoric

“Economic populism refers to the idea that the economic well-being of the ‘people’ is ignored or betrayed by the ‘elite’ and that it should be re-established, notably by means of restoring the nation’s economic sovereignty.” (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020, 5). Mazzoleni and Ivaldi argue that in the economic populist framework, there is a strong moral and cultural undertone to the conflict between the elite and the general populace. In this context, “corrupt” elites are positioned in an antagonistic relationship with the “pure” people, and by invoking economic narratives populist leaders call in for feelings of nostalgia (Betz 2015); the good old days when national identity and economic well-being were solid and secure (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020).

Once we get more in-depth into analyzing populism, we can witness how the scholars draw a line between left and right-wing populism depending on the narratives that populists use to create a threat. For instance, de la Torre (2018) distinguishes between right-wing and left-wing variants of populism, where the former uses “ethnic and religious means for populist mobilization, while the latter “at least promise to become a better democracy and do not use racism and xenophobia to appeal to their constituencies” (de la Torre 2018, 9). While the right-wing mostly addresses corrupt politicians (and the EU for example) (Betz 2015, Ivaldi 2019, Berend 2021); the left-wing targets MNCs, businesses, and the wealthy as the source of evil (Rodrik 2018, Ivaldi 2019, Berend 2021). Populists incorporate the supply side of politics and construct the narratives for popular mobilization in a way that corresponds with the demand side (Rodrik 2018). That is, populists explain current events, why certain things happen, and who are the ones to blame (Rodrik 2018, de la Torre 2018)

Here, economic narratives are social constructs that help populists to persuade the people of the necessity of major economic change. While left-wing populists focus on more social and redistributive policies, right-wing populists advocate for either neoliberal or welfare-

chauvinistic policies. Thus, by positioning the current state of economic affairs in the country as a disaster, populists construct narratives to highlight that the country will remain in chaos if the changes are not applied.

1.3 Why France?

In order to better understand the effects of populist narratives, this research will undertake a case comparison of the French right (Rassemblement National, Marine Le Pen) and left-wing (La France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Melenchon) speeches. French populism represents a unique case study, with both right- and left-wing populist leaders being influential in the political arena. It is generally accepted that Le Pen supporters favor anti-immigration, and anti-pluralism, in contrast to Melenchon supporters who target economic equality and proper income distribution (Ivaldi 2019). However, this thesis will illustrate that these differences are overexaggerated, specifically when it comes to economic narrative construction in the context of the 2022 presidential elections.

First of all, the following part of the literature review will provide a historical background of the left- and right-wing populist leaders in France. Then, I will examine the right and left divisions presented by the scholarship and shed light on the economic features of French populist rhetoric. The examination of Melenchon's and Le Pen's party histories and discourses will provide a foundation for the comparative analysis of their narrative construction.

1.3.1 French Populism: Shift from Left to Populist Left

Historically in France, from Napoleon to Charles De Gaulle, populism has been associated with right-wing movements or leaders and was characterized by policies built upon the public's fears and discontent (Marlière 2019). By contrast, the French left-wing has always emphasized shared forms of leadership and collective identity, which distanced it from populism that focuses on 'undefined people' (Marlière 2019). However, Chiocchetti (2019, 114) argues that

the ‘populist turn’ is not exactly a new phenomenon on the French left, as several radical left leaders in France have previously invoked populist discourse that is similar to Melenchon’s (e.g. Marie-George Buffet, Olivier Basancenot).

The FN and LFI, Chantal Mouffe (2017) argued, differed in that the former was authoritarian and focused on restricting democracy to French nationals, whereas the latter sought to forge a collective will that would allow advancing democracy. Chiocchetti (2019, 111) notes that Jean-Luc Melenchon draws from a variety of ideological traditions: “classical Marxism, French socialism, French communism, left-wing republicanism, alter-globalization, Latin American socialism, radical ecology, and techno-futurism”. Combined, his ideas represent a mixture of radicalization of the French left and personalistic performance (Chiocchetti 2019). Prior to launching his own party, the Left Party (Parti de Gauche, PG) in 2008, Melenchon’s political career included membership in Organisation Communiste Internationale (1972-76), Socialist Party (1976), Senate membership (1986-2000 and 2004-10); he was also a Minister of Vocational Education (2000-02), and one of the leaders of the Socialist Left (from the ’90s onwards) (Marlière 2019, 5).

According to Chiocchetti (2019), several elements of Melenchon’s rhetoric make him more populist than other left-wing politicians. Melenchon’s verbal triggers are ‘the people’, ‘the Nation’, and ‘the Republic’, which have previously not been so rigorously emphasized (Chiocchetti 2019). In addition, his rhetoric called for a revolution of the people against traditional political wings (Chiocchetti 2019). Last but not least, Chiocchetti argues that the claim to be the voice of ‘the people’ was indeed present in the post-1980s French left-wing discourse. However, it only gained credibility when Melenchon launched his personalistic and populist campaign in 2017, which according to the polls helped him achieve huge popular support (Chiocchetti 2019).

Marlière (2019) convincingly argues that Melenchon claims to be a Republican, who believes in democracy, and that is why he ‘calls for citizen’s revolution through the ballot box’. During the 2012 Presidential elections, Melenchon was identified as a leftist candidate, contrary to 2017 when he based his campaign on a populist message, claiming that Rebellious France is not a party but a ‘mass of citizens.’ (Marlière 2019, 7). Ever since he rebranded the party from left to populist left, Melenchon sought to replace and reshape the French leftist movements (Marlière 2019).

1.3.2 La France Insoumise Rhetoric

Jean-Luc Melenchon’s rhetoric embraces all the essential elements of populism: an antagonistic outlook following people-centrism versus anti-establishment appeals (Chiocchetti 2019). His manifestos for the 2012 and 2017 campaigns seek to mobilize the ‘oppressed’ ‘hard-working’ majority, who must embrace their will at the political and social levels against the ‘immoral’ elites, the ‘exploitative’ minority whose rule is coming to an end (Chiocchetti 2019).

Ivaldi (2019, 30) argues that LFI structures its rhetoric around socioeconomic issues, and its “economic populism embraces socialism against the neoliberal establishment”. According to Ivaldi (2019, 31), LFI is firmly opposed to austerity and is in favor of economic intervention by the government, public spending, and redistribution of wealth. Originally, Melenchon’s party advocated for social inclusion and was advocating for the rights of minorities and migrants in French society (Ivaldi 2019). However, in light of the migrant influx and the expanded fears among French voters, the image of inclusiveness has been slightly toned down (Ivaldi 2019).

Melenchon has been promoting a radical overhaul of the political system since 2012, focusing on a transition to a ‘Sixth Republic’, (Ivaldi 2019, Orban 2019, Marlière 2019, Chiocchetti 2019), where the ‘presidential monarchy’ would be abolished (Ivaldi 2019). Within

the framework of the 2017 Presidential elections, Melenchon's strategy was not necessarily class-oriented, since he aimed to reach those voters who could not put themselves on the right or left spectrum and were disappointed in political elites (Orban 2019). In addition to strongly supporting proportional representation and the right of voters to recall elected officials, Melenchon also promoted a strong anti-corruption agenda (Ivaldi 2019). He also got rid of the traditional red-colored leftist flag in favor of the French tricolor and moved away from traditional leftist rhetoric, as a part of a strategy to attract a broader spectrum of voters, including right-wing followers (Orban 2019, Ivaldi 2019, Marlière 2019). Nevertheless, Orban (2019, 87) argued that "similarities in form do not equal similarities in content and that there is a real distinction between Marine Le Pen's nationalist and identity-based populism and Melenchon's revolutionary populism".

1.3.3 Right-Wing Populism in France: Front National

The emergence of right-wing populism in France dates back to the evolvement of the Boulangist radical right in France. It was initially brought together to defend the nation and used to mobilize lower-class voters. Boulangist rhetoric included a nativist agenda aimed to scapegoat the 'aliens' that desire to ruin the French identity – Jews, Protestants, and foreign workers (Betz 2018, 93). Jean-Marie Le Pen and FN's agenda in the 1980s was influenced by the Boulangist rhetoric strategy, and program, which contributed to the establishment of the populist radical right in France (Betz 2018, 92). Ivaldi (2019, 35) also argued that nativist and anti-elitist appeals were the most salient elements featuring the electoral breakthrough of FN in the mid-1980s.

Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, FN's focus was based more on its ideology than on concrete policies. As a party leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen never sought high office. He embraced the role of being a 'political maverick', who shocked the educated middle class with his radical policies (Betz 2015, 79). From the outset, Le Pen's party put an emphasis on the threat posed by

immigration—particularly Muslim immigration from the former colonies to France. In addition, the party opposed European integration and sought prohibitions on the building of additional mosques in France.

Since its establishment, FN's incorporated in its rhetoric the claim that democracy has been 'confiscated' by a group of political elites, which has significantly widened the gap between 'the people' and 'the establishment' (Betz 2018, 93). Moreover, Jean-Marie Le Pen blamed the political elites for their inability to protect the citizens and national interests of the country against the flow of immigrants. He invoked nativist rhetoric to underline the interests of the French people and prioritized the preservation of French values and traditions above everything else. Within this framework, Jean-Marie Le Pen created himself a 'tribunus plebis' (tribune of the people) image, i.e. the leader, capable of giving power back to the people (Betz 2018, 93).

1.3.4 Front National's Rhetoric

In 2011, Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, took the party's presidency with the goal of de-demonize FN and position the party within the mainstream (Betz 2015). Ever since she became the leader of Front National (now party renamed Rassemblement National), Le Pen sought to re-establish Republicanism in France, by getting back control of its sovereignty, and borders, aiming to preserve French culture, which was vividly reflected in her anti-immigration campaigns. In contrast to the left wing, Marine Le Pen's right-wing policies were built upon welfare chauvinism, which is most visible in her desire to implement policies of social protectionism ('priorite nationale'), where French citizens would be given priority in terms of housing, jobs, and welfare benefits.

According to Betz (2015), FN, due to the economic instability of the past decade, adopted economic populism rhetoric, addressing 'those at the bottom' or so-called 'losers of globalization' and claiming to protect 'invisible' and 'forgotten' people. In her campaigns, she

suggested lowering the retirement age, and increasing social spending, all of which are similar to leftist populist campaigns (Ivaldi 2019). According to Ivaldi (2019) and Betz (2015), FN's "idealized economic people refers to a broad coalition of socio-economic groups at the 'bottom of society' (La France d'en-bas), a "silent majority" (majorité silencieuse) made of all the "left behind", "invisible" and "forgotten ones who have been abandoned by political elites", and who embody a "generous and hardworking France" (Ivaldi 2019, 29).

The FN's rhetoric is built on the idea that immigrants, together with the elites and the EU pose a threat to the economic well-being of the French working class (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020). Similar to the left wing, Le Pen illustrates the elites as the wealthy, who get everything with nothing left for the 'little people' (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020). Economic protectionism is also a dominant element in her campaigns, as she claimed that the EU is one of the main inhibitors of French economic prosperity (Le Pen 2017).

Moreover, Le Pen's populist rhetoric can be observed in her agitations against EU elites. She blamed the EU for the economic crisis that has shaken the country and criticized the single currency. One of the elements that significantly contributed to the construction of her populist rhetoric became *trait d'union* (concept of sovereignty): "Sovereignism is a form of grievance, a reaction that aims at bringing back control within a specific territory, namely the nation-state" (Basile and Mazzoleni 2019, 7). Similar to other right-wing populists, Le Pen called for people to embrace that the EU has taken away the exclusive authority that the French used to have over their territory (Basile and Mazzoleni 2019, 4). She stressed that there is a need to 'take back control', due to the fact that the political establishment is no longer in power to address challenges and represent the will of its people (Basile and Mazzoleni 2019, 4).

On this matter, she framed her own solution to the economic issues that France was facing. A proposal, strongly embedded in the concept of sovereignty indicated the transformation of

the EU into the “European Soviet Union”, i.e. to recreate the European Union into a community of sovereign states (Le Pen 2012). This would result in the supremacy of the national laws over the EU law and would allow France to function enjoying full sovereignty by regaining control of its borders and putting an end to the ‘elite-driven project’, imposed on ‘the people’ against their will.

Even though both Le Pen and Melenchon targeted low-income voters, workers, and young people, and were mostly dissatisfied with the current elites citizens, scholars like Orban (2019) argue that Melenchon’s followers were more erudite than Le Pen’s. Orban argues that Melenchon addressed ‘the ordinary people’ by using phrases such as ‘democracy’, ‘will’, ‘referendum’, and ‘sovereignty’ contrary to Le Pen whose verbal triggers were ‘corrupt’, ‘betrayal’, and ‘lies’. Thus, for Melenchon ‘the people’ were not solely belonging to the French nation, but were a result of historical, political, and social construction (Orban 2019).

In general, the literature on right-wing populism mostly neglects the economic factors embedded in populist rhetoric. Therefore, this research aims to demonstrate that currently, left and right-wing populists both rely on the same economic narratives as a strategy for mass mobilization.

CHAPTER 2 - ANALYSIS

2.1 Methodology

The analytical part of this study will be conducted via narrative analysis, which is a research method that allows the interpretation of human experiences and motivations by analyzing the narratives embedded in their stories, taking into account the context in which these stories are told (Al-Saraf 2023). Within the scope of narrative analysis, I will use the bottom-up inductive approach and will analyze the data without a pre-existing hypothesis. The goal of this study will be to observe the patterns and themes of narrative construction in Marine Le Pen's and Jean-Luc Melenchon's stories and develop an interpretation from which I will draw conclusions that answer my research question.

I collected the data (campaign speeches from Jean-Luc Melenchon and Marine Le Pen's 2022 campaign websites) from the 2022 Presidential elections. Following that, I transcribed the data and then tracked down the stories from my transcripts. Then, I identified the [economic] narratives in the stories, focusing on *what* Le Pen and Melenchon say about economics, and *how* they put their stories together; as well as what is common and repeatably said (Smith 2017). The analysis will begin by examining Jean-Luc Melenchon's campaign speeches, where I identify how he creates economic narratives to promote certain policies. The next section will include Marine Le Pen's analysis of economic narrative construction in her campaign speeches.

The last section of the analysis is a comparative examination of left and right-wing storylines according to the framework of the narrative analysis presented by Amy Skonieczny (2018). By looking at how Le Pen and Melenchon construct economic narratives to explain economic crises and issues that France is facing, I will identify how they position 'the hard-working people' against 'the corrupt elites', and who are to be blamed for the crises. The aim

of this juxtaposition is to define the differences and similarities in how Le Pen and Melenchon explain the crises and address economic elites. When defining the narratives in campaign speeches, it is also crucial to take into account the audience that the actors try to influence. The narratives that call for a sense of collective being are considered a key to populist success (Skonieczny 2018).

The [economic] narrative analysis will place Le Pen's and Melenchon's rhetoric in the context of contemporary understanding of right and left populism. By applying the definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004), that is based on the antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite', where politics should be an expression of the general will (*volonté générale*), this study seeks to identify whether economic transformations and crises allowed for similar narrative construction in both left and right-wing cases of populism in France. As a result, this study shows that *economics is a unifying element in right and left-wing populist discourse*.

2.2 Analysis of the Left-wing Rhetoric

In the framework of the 2022 Presidential elections, Jean-Luc Melenchon created his campaign by focusing on major issues and crises that the French were facing. Taking into account the post-Covid crisis and the Russia's war against Ukraine, it was highly important for Melenchon to convey that, unlike President Macron, he cares about ordinary people and is ready to dismiss the European Treaties to give the 'forgotten' French people their voice (Melenchon 2022e). Melenchon's verbal triggers, i.e. catchphrases that elicit specific emotions and are salient in his narrative construction are: 'market is chaos', 'capitalism', 'the poor versus the wealthy', 'the common future,' and 'dignity'. His populist storyline has a theme of revolution, which encourages 'voiceless' and 'forgotten' people to get control of their lives and proposes the program of the 'Common Future' (*l'Avenir en Commun*).

Melenchon highlights the importance of the 2022 Presidential election by stating: “When the election like a presidential election arrives, it is an extraordinary moment, in a crazy system, like the system of the 5th Republic, we instinctively know that since so many powers are concentrated in one place, it is time to seize the power, because from then on we can return everything” (Melenchon 2022e). In the 2022 elections, Melenchon created a collective subject, the French people (and the Popular Union which represents their general will) versus the elites. He argues that the people are social creatures, and not mere individuals as the elites see them, and argues that Popular Union can lead the people towards a better future, highlighting that ‘A Different World is Possible’ (Un Autre Monde est Possible) (Melenchon 2022e).

In his campaign speech in Strasbourg on January 19th, 2022, and in Tours on February 3rd, 2022, Melenchon affirmed to the public that the ‘*market is chaos*’, claiming that it only guarantees the domination of the strongest. Melenchon explained that the market “was incapable of correcting itself, even in times of crisis, and recalled that the ultra-rich got richer during the pandemic while the prices of basic goods kept rising” (Melenchon 2022c). Melenchon is telling the narrative by claiming that there are people who led to the crises, who claimed that the economy protects the schools, and hospitals, that the market economy is beneficial, and that in reality, it all led to chaos. He explains that what the elites are doing is the opposite of what the people want: “the society abandoned to the market is a society where the law of the strongest dominates, and *we* want to make mutual aid and solidarity, that is to say, the opposite of the market” (Melenchon 2022e).

In the process of economic narrative construction, as a [imagined] solution to the crisis of the market economy, Melenchon proposed to introduce the price cap on energy prices and the first five or six mass popular consumptions allowing people to survive (Melenchon 2022a, Melenchon 2022b). He stressed that 12 million people in France suffered from the cold, which

is unacceptable in a country where even during crises unheard-of over-profits are realized at the same time (Melenchon 2022a). His story is that the current economic system is unable to self-regulate with demand pressure, leading to a so-called ‘social emergency’ (Melenchon 2022a). To fight back, he encouraged citizens’ intervention in determining the price freeze. He convincingly argued that it is the people and not the financial elites who must decide the faiths of the French people. By raising the issues of salaries and taxation, Melenchon addresses the proposal for the reduction of social contributions, introduced by other candidates like Macron, “compulsory deductions will no longer be obligatory, so you will pay for it from your pocket with your time, and it will cost you more than when you paid the social contributions” (Melenchon 2022e). He was calling the people to explain this to those around them, so they won’t “get caught by the stories against their interests”, specifically a story with an outcome beneficial for the elites, and not the ordinary people (Melenchon 2022e).

Several striking features of the speech fill out the anti-elitist economic narratives the left-wing Presidential candidate produced in the 2022 elections. One of his major campaign speeches took place in Nantes, on January 16th, 2022, where over 5000 people came to listen to Jean-Luc Melenchon’s policy proposals. The power of the populist storyline in Jean-Luc Melenchon’s speech can be tracked down to his claims that everything was rooted in social issues and the capitalist system’s greed, pointing out the antagonism between the people and the elites (capitalists) (Melenchon 2022b). He advocated for incorporating the green rule into the Constitution so that we do not take more from nature than it can replenish (Melenchon 2022b).

Certain narratives used by Melenchon in his storylines represent more attractive policies to ordinary people. He represented the world in ‘black and white’ terms, asserting that people are suffering now from economic hardships and asserting that this must be stopped. He declared

that if he were elected President of the Republic in April 2022, he would enact legislation to freeze energy prices and limit bank fees (Melenchon 2022b, Melenchon 2022d). Since a high number of his supporters come from the youth, Melenchon's campaign had to include a proposal attractive to the young generation, such as his proposal to raise the minimum wage to 1,400 euros net per month (Melenchon 2022b). Another significant element of his campaign included the proposal to establish a maximum inheritance of 12 million euros, above which a 100% tax would be levied to fund the autonomy allowance for young people, which is currently set at 1,063 euros per month (Melenchon 2022b). Contrary to President Macron, who campaigned to increase the retirement age, Melenchon reiterated his desire to lower retirement to the age of 60 (Melenchon 2022b). As mentioned previously, Melenchon's program in the 2022 Presidential elections was called "Future in Common", and that is why, in his speeches, he pledged the people to vote. Together, he believed, they could change the world (Melenchon 2022c).

In the context of financial and climate crises, Melenchon repeatedly mentioned that the financial capitalists (the elites) were the ones responsible for the crisis, and he is the one who has a team capable of addressing these issues (Melenchon 2022d). In his storyline, Melenchon highlights the importance of achieving sustainable and organic agriculture, by creating more agricultural ministries, to ensure that children across the country are eating healthily (Melenchon 2022d). To achieve this, he argued that the 'social conditions of peasantry must be changed', emphasizing the unbearable work conditions which farmers are facing nowadays, and the fact that the elites are ignorant of these issues (Melenchon 2022d). He argues, "I want people to understand because we are going to meet all these challenges, we need thousands of people to work and they must be treated with dignity. Consequently, for the Popular Union, there is a preferential option for the poorest, for all those put on the side of the road and deprived of the happiness of living" (Melenchon 2022d).

By raising the issue of poverty (12 million people in France are below the poverty line), Melenchon linked their economic disadvantages with his most commonly addressed scapegoat – President Macron. Melenchon blamed Macron for claiming that people are ‘100% responsible for their fate’, and that the poor are responsible for their poverty, the unemployed are responsible for their unemployment, etc. (Melenchon 2022d). He stated that currently in the country the five richest people possess the same wealth as twenty-seven million people. The quality of life for the poor has declined compared to the wealthy who only became richer (Melenchon 2022f). Melenchon invokes proximity to the people by arguing that, unlike mainstream candidates, his party was going ‘door to door’ to reach the hearts of the people (Melenchon 2022d). He convincingly created a line between the good people and the bad people - the ones who want to fight poverty versus the others who were the cause of it. In this case, the economic narratives can be tracked in Melenchon’s program that benefits the poor. He claimed that Popular Union’s program addresses a common future - it is a program of transition from a capitalist society, which is based on egoism and greed, toward a society of mutual aid and solidarity (Melenchon 2022d).

Melenchon’s economic narrative showcases the incumbent government functioning in France as a disaster and betrayal of the French people. He argued that “France is incorrigible in its love for freedom, which denounces the interests of law which reduced these freedoms in this country since the beginning of the mandate of Mr. Macron” (Melenchon 2022f). He claimed that Macron saw no difference in public and private affairs, and, brought in the example of private firms (such as McKinsey) giving state advice instead of the civil servants who usually deal with public affairs in the country. Melenchon once again rallied the people by claiming: “We cannot disassociate the electoral campaign from the demands of the hard-working people, We cannot disassociate the election from all the devastations caused by the

liberal politicians” (Melenchon 2022g). Melenchon thus used proximity to the people to argue that he is the hero of the story. He showed that he is one of them, that he is truly the one who represents the needs of the people: “If you arrive at the second round, I will show that we are determined to change the world because that is what you will do if we win this election” (Melenchon 2022g).

2.3 Analysis of the Right-wing Rhetoric

Prior to the 2022 Presidential elections, Le Pen’s approach to immigration, Islam, and the EU was seen as ‘illusionary’, if not ‘disastrous’, to the country. Therefore, by announcing a second rebranding and getting on the path to changing the party’s reputation, in the 2022 Presidential elections Le Pen decided to prove that she is a candidate who is capable of addressing the real issues that France is facing. Consequently, the movement toward the mainstream seemed to allow Marine Le Pen to unfold a new approach to state politics.

Le Pen’s presidential campaign was constructed around crisis performance and feelings of discontent with the political and economic elites in France. She claimed that France is no longer the country they love, pointing out the person responsible for this dispossession: “Never forget that it is Emmanuel Macron, the so-called Mozart of finance, who has only managed to compose a dramatic symphony in five years and who concludes his five-year term with an increased debt of nearly 600 billion euros and foreign trade with a dizzying deficit.” (Le Pen 2022c). Her economic narrative was a crisis of unemployment. She argued that Macron was the one who said that ‘it is enough to cross the road to find a job’, while unemployment levels these days are as low as at the time he was elected (Le Pen 2022c).

In her campaign speeches, Le Pen argued that the whole duration of Macron’s presidency was ‘chaos’, featuring crises, that he not only provoked but also exacerbated (Le Pen 2022a, Le Pen 2022b). In her economic narrative, Le Pen built upon feelings of abandonment. Mr.

Macron was the one who did not care about the ordinary people - the one who ‘crushes hope’, and thus led to this ‘society without connection’ (Le Pen 2022c). The pattern featured in her storyline is framed around the fact that Macron’s Presidency led to “the *degradation* of the presidential function, the *betrayal* of duties towards the French such as the corrosion of the government by *lies* and concealment have brought the country even closer to the *collapse* and the French to the downgrading.” (Le Pen 2022b). To fix these problems, Le Pen called for a state of emergency in the country, where the social division must be addressed urgently (Le Pen 2022c). Le Pen convincingly argued that ‘there is no other solution to this crisis than to get out of it’ (Le Pen 2022b). Thus, she positioned herself as the one who can ‘save’ and ‘protect’ the people from the elite: “My hand will never tremble when it comes to defending the French and those who protect them” (Le Pen 2022c).

Even though Marine Le Pen’s campaign was largely focused on immigration issues, in the context of the crises and rising prices, she had to dedicate a tremendous amount of her campaign to economic problems. Her main message had a theme of a *failing France*, where the economy is suffering, and globalization is destroying the livelihoods of French people (Le Pen 2022d). Her campaign was focusing on the costs of living, and she claimed the importance of improving the quality of life of the youth. She proposed reducing income tax up until the age of 30, allowing young people to save up and start families (Le Pen 2022c). Moreover, she argued for a salary increase of 10% and up to 3 times the minimum wage (Le Pen 2022c). In her narrative construction, she argued that the future is not going to be bright with the current elites in power: “What will happen, in fact, to you, to your children, to our existence as a people if France remains left to the greed of private interests, to the savage of offenders, to the injustice of politicians, to the permanent challenge of our values and our way of life, to the displayed contempt of the elites for the people, to the assault of globalists on our sovereignty.” (Le Pen 2022b).

As an advocate of protectionism, Le Pen sought to make the workers feel valued and claimed that she will give the people back their pride (Le Pen 2022b). She highlighted that the excellence of the ‘Made in France’ production will be honored (Le Pen 2022c). In a similar narrative construction, Le Pen argued for the importance of agriculture: “Agriculture, our agriculture, must once again become the instrument of French excellence at the service of our country's food sovereignty” (Le Pen 2022c). Her proposal regarding agriculture followed that, “The quality of agricultural products must be recognized, farmers protected, their incomes secured, and the first proof of trust will be to make the use of French products in our canteens mandatory in the long term” (Le Pen 2022c).

Le Pen’s economic narrative construction can be tracked when she addresses the people of the small archipelago of Mayotte, where the people faced economic insecurities despite their cry for help being ignored by President Macron (Le Pen 2022a). Le Pen’s storyline builds upon the issue of immigration and the ‘carelessness’ of the leaders, which she argues is the root cause of the insecurities and economic anxieties of the Mayotte people (Le Pen 2022a). By contrast, Le Pen argued that she will invest in the island and will make sure that the French people of Mayotte will enjoy the same benefits as other French citizens: “I will reform the dock dues, which increases the price of imported products here in Mayotte, by exempting French and European Union products from the latter.” (Le Pen 2022a). Le Pen argues that she is different from the establishment, that she is the one who actually cares about the people, their children, and their future: “I want a prosperous economy for the Mahorais, which exploits all the potential offered by its exceptional geographical location, in this strategic region of the Mozambique Channel [...] You have understood, my dear friends, if I am the only one to carry such a detailed, worked and structured project for Mayotte, it is because I feel a strong

attachment, a deep attachment, a sincere attachment to this island, your island, so far from Metropolis but so dear to my heart” (Le Pen 2022a).

Another important issue addressed in her campaign speeches is taking place in the context of the economic crisis that followed after the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s war against Ukraine. On the matter of the energy policy, Le Pen took into account the rising prices for fuel and the general public’s dissatisfaction by bringing it into her storyline. By creating a timeline of Macron’s energy and tax policies, Le Pen clearly identified the failures of the political establishment, emphasizing that in the five years of Macron’s presidency, the energy prices got higher, taxes did not get lower, and government spending increased (a waste of money that Le Pen argued she would have avoided) (Le Pen 2022e). As a hero of the story, Le Pen argued that her plan was more ‘realistic’ compared to what Macron had done.

Le Pen constructed a collective subject of the people in opposition to the political establishment (mainly President Macron), whom she claims, “places little consideration on social dialogue and intermediate bodies, even towards those closest to him.” (Le Pen 2022g). Le Pen highlights the many social issues that arose from the pandemic, and now, at the end of Macron’s presidency came to a ‘boiling point’ (Le Pen 2022g). Thus, Le Pen called for a change to avoid further social difficulties: “We must give back to the intermediate bodies the place that belongs to them. We live in an uncertain world, where the collective sphere tends to fade behind the individual spheres and where the disconnection of the elites from the problems of the middle and popular classes is worsening” (Le Pen 2022g).

She argued that to properly address the problem, the candidate must be interested in daily social issues that the French are facing (Le Pen 2022g). Her narrative construction can be tracked in the phrases where she claims to understand the socio-economic issues of the population, and she highlighted that she is ‘the only one’ who truly cares about the people:

“Helping young people is not telling them to cross the street to find a job. It is to give them the means to stay, to train, to move. Helping workers is guaranteeing their purchasing power. Thinking about pensions is not imposing working longer. It is a matter of consideration, proximity, attention, respect for the people” (Le Pen 2022g). The outcome of the election, she argues, will decide if people are living a better life in the upcoming decade, if France is put on the trajectory of virtuous growth, and if sovereignty is achieved (Le Pen 2022g).

On April 8th, 2022, two days before the first round of elections, Marine Le Pen appealed to the voters, by convincingly arguing that: “If the people vote the people win” (Le Pen 2022f). She highlighted how important the vote was for the country by invoking a populist claim that National Rally represents ‘the people’. Le Pen constantly reminded her supporters that the future of the country they love was at stake: “Together, we will give back to our people France they love!” (Le Pen 2022f). She was campaigning for six months, visiting French people from different areas. Le Pen believes that addressing the needs of the people from rural areas means representing “the real French”. To put herself closer to the ordinary people, Le Pen chose a strategy of campaigning in the small towns and addressing the economic issues that the ordinary people faced: “I am not a TV studio candidate, not the big city candidate. I am the candidate for France’s forgotten people” (Le Pen 2022d). Through her narrative construction, Le Pen managed to transform economic issues into influential stories of political betrayal. In this context, Le Pen has made it clear that she is capable to save the nation by getting them out of the crises that the political establishment has allowed in France.

2.4 Comparative analysis of the left- and right-wing rhetoric

The two previous sections reported an economic narrative analysis of the right- and left-wing campaign speeches in the framework of the 2022 French Presidential elections. For the

purpose of this thesis, the final analytical section will compare the differences and similarities in populist narrative construction between Melenchon and Le Pen.

In order to compare the storylines told by Le Pen and Melenchon in their campaign speeches, it is crucial to place them in the socio-economic context that featured the elections. The post-pandemic economic crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine-related socioeconomic anxiety have contributed to populist responses at both ends of the political spectrum in the 2022 French presidential election (Ivaldi 2023). Moreover, Le Pen and Melenchon had to place these issues at the top of the political agenda due to the energy crisis and rising fuel prices. This allowed them to blur the line between ideological differences and allowed for greater similarities in terms of economic narratives.

The main theme of Le Pen's and Melenchon's campaign speeches was that Macron has provoked and perpetuated the crises that have destroyed the life of the ordinary French people. By describing the world in 'black and white' terms, Le Pen and Melenchon framed Macron as 'the evil elite', who created financial chaos in France during his presidency and does not see the needs of the ordinary people. Contrary to that, Le Pen and Melenchon constructed their narratives in a way that made them popular heroes. They positioned themselves as 'the only ones' who are capable to give the people what they need, as they were the ones who went 'door to door' (Melenchon 2022d) and 'talked to people directly' (Le Pen 2022a). This illustrates the similarities in how they constructed the collective subjects, as both of them addressed the French people ('Us') versus Macron and his party ('Them').

Therefore, to address people's needs, both Le Pen and Melenchon argued against unemployment and invoked similar narratives to blame Macron for his ignorance and oversimplifying the problem. Specifically, they claimed that Macron suggested the youth simply 'cross the street' and find a job, while Melenchon and Le Pen included policy proposals

that aimed to benefit the young generation financially (Le Pen: no income tax for people aged under 30; Melenchon: minimum wage 1,400 euro net) (Le Pen 2022c, Melenchon 2022b). Thus, in the context of the crises and unemployment, both Melenchon and Le Pen have presented themselves as the ones who have a thought-through program - one that addresses the poor and does not benefit the financial elites (contrary to Macron's program that benefits businesses and not ordinary people).

The economic narrative construction can also be traced in the protectionist policies regarding agriculture, where both Le Pen and Melenchon address the farmers who must have their 'dignity' back (Melenchon 2022d) and must not be subject to European regulations and whose job should not be overtaken by the foreign imports ('Made in France' to be valued again (Le Pen 2022c)). Le Pen and Melenchon invoked a powerful language of constructing a collective wholeness. They claimed that the elites see French people as mere individuals, and not as a society, contrary to them, who are capable of getting France out of this 'state of emergency'. Consequently, the image of a 'failing France' represented by Melenchon and Le Pen allows them to create a *fantasy future* in their storylines, where the people must act to recapture the power of taking control over their lives, by electing the ones who are the 'true' representatives of the general will (Marine Le Pen: 'If the People Vote the People Win'; Melenchon: For the 'Common Future') (Le Pen 2022f, Melenchon 2022e).

Despite the presented similarities, several ideological differences feature Le Pen's and Melenchon's campaign speeches. Apart from the prominent economic narrative in the framework 2022 electoral campaign, Marine Le Pen's speeches have also always featured the theme of immigration. As a part of her discourse moderation, she aimed to address the issue of immigration from a more mainstream perspective and attempted to avoid scapegoating Muslim immigrants, by focusing on contemporary issues in the society. She claimed that uncontrolled

immigration poses a vital threat to the French: “This wildness everywhere reaches such a level that it begins to prevent all social life, upsets economic life, and even spoils the simple joys of life” (Le Pen 2022c). Moreover, she highlighted the threat of immigration to the French national identity and lifestyle, arguing for a major change that will save the nation: “Immigration cannot continue to remain uncontrolled, otherwise France will renounce its sovereignty and the French will be forced to accept what they do not want, to coexist with populations who intend to remain foreigners in France” (Le Pen 2022c). Thus, she blamed the elites, mainly Mr. Macron, for the feelings of insecurity, abandonment, and welfare burden that immigrants imposed on the French during Macron’s presidency, not to mention the inability to deal with the issue of immigration (Le Pen 2022c). As a hero of this story, Le Pen argued that the threat is still there, the migrants who came will always possess a threat to the French identity, unless there is a leader in power who loves the country, values the tradition, and is capable of sending the people who are unable to live under the French customs back (Le Pen 2022c).

In contrast with Le Pen, Melenchon has never addressed migrants as scapegoats and was always highlighting the importance of equality in French society. In his campaign speech in Nantes, Melenchon argued that migrants are welcomed in France and pointed out that immigration is a key to social development (Melenchon 2022b). In a similar manner, both Le Pen and Melenchon create a collective identity around the ‘hard-working’ people that are ‘forgotten’ by the elites, however, Melenchon addresses all the people living in France, while Le Pen’s policies are usually targeting primarily French nationals (specifically her ‘priorite nationale’ (national priority) program). Nevertheless, their narrative construction features economic arguments that aimed to benefit the ‘abandoned’ and ‘voiceless’ people. Thus, the main message of their narratives was in the juxtaposition of the ‘good’ people versus the ‘evil’

elite, where Macron was placed as the source of all the problems (by both Le Pen and Melenchon), and they were the heroes and the saviors of the people.

CONCLUSION

The narrative analysis in this thesis portrayed how Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Melenchon constructed their economic narratives in the framework of the 2022 French Presidential elections. The aim of this study was to demonstrate that the right/left-wing populist division is not as prominent as argued in the scholarly literature (primarily by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Inglehart and Norris), and by analyzing the campaign speeches of Le Pen and Melenchon to illustrate that economics is a salient feature in the narrative construction of both right and left-wing discourses.

From the comparative perspective, the analysis of the left- and right-wing economic proposals showcased the differences and similarities in their populist storylines. In the context of the crises and Russia's war against Ukraine, the main socioeconomic concerns of the people were highlighted in their campaign speeches. Le Pen and Melenchon invoked a populist theme – the Manichean worldview that has a central feature of the people versus the elites and addressed the ones who were 'invisible' (the poor people) and 'ignorant' (the youth). They both framed a collective subject around the French people, targeting mostly the same audiences – the poor, the youth, and the disadvantaged workers. A powerful theme of 'us' versus 'them' is featuring their narrative construction, and, in a similar manner for both of them President Macron is a villain, the one who represents the financial elites, and not the ordinary people. He is the one who does not care about the young generation, and neither he does about the older generation, as in contrast with Le Pen and Melenchon he wants to raise the retirement age.

By pointing out the issues of unemployment, poverty levels, instability, and economic anxiety that featured Macron's presidency, Le Pen and Melenchon effectively create the target of blame, who is the source of all the problems and crises they are facing. In this context, they positioned themselves as the ones who understand the people, creating the feeling of a

collective society with a leader who represents their general will. Both Le Pen and Melenchon managed to create a crisis out of the economic issues that the French were facing. Thus, they asserted that all these issues can come to an end if the new President gets to power – someone who is capable of ‘saving the people’. Proximity to the people allowed both Le Pen and Melenchon to position themselves as the representatives of the general will. Building the narratives upon feelings of anxiety and discontent with the established elites, the antagonistic relationship allowed the people to identify who is truly representing them. Thus, Le Pen’s and Melenchon’s economic policy proposals suggested a fantasy future, featuring ideas such as ‘dignifying the workers’, and economic protectionism, where they appear as the heroes who will protect the people against the villains.

As a result, this thesis contributes to the field by arguing against the traditional division of the left- and right-wing populists’ discourse. While the literature focuses on the traditional left-wing (economic) and right-wing (cultural) divisions, mostly emphasizing the political and cultural aspects of populism, this thesis argued that economics is still an important feature of both right- and left-wing populist rhetoric. The economic narrative analysis thus illustrated that despite the fact that Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Melenchon invoked the same ‘black and white’ theme in their campaign speeches to convince the populace that significant economic change is necessary, they have done so in a slightly different way. Le Pen’s storyline featured right-wing neoliberal policies proposals, such as the reduction of the income tax for citizens under the age of 30 (Le Pen 2022c), while Melenchon’s narratives included classic left-wing economic policies, such as raising the minimum wage to 1,400 euros net (Melenchon 2022b). In the end, by invoking proximity to the people in their storylines, Le Pen and Melenchon appeared as the ones who belong to the people and offered more ‘realistic’ and ‘better planned’ policies, that allowed for an economic recovery and promised wholeness in the future.

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