


## **Le Pen, Zemmour and the 'patriotic ecology' of the French far right: The case of the 2022 presidential elections**

### **Le Pen, Zemmour et l' « écologie patriotique » de l'extrême droite française : Le cas des élections présidentielles 2022**

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#### Abstract

The French far right has historically been torn between two strategies which were opposed during the 2022 presidential campaign, a modernist line who was embodied by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and a traditionalist line who was represented by Éric Zemmour's Reconquête. This article specifically examines the way the differences between the modernist and traditionalist lines were expressed when it comes to the topic of environmental concerns. Indeed, while ecological issues have long been seen as the exclusive domain of the political left, the increasing salience of the climate crisis means that politicians across the political spectrum have provided their own perspective on ecological issues. Building on a deeper tradition of conservative and nationalist thought about the environment, this article demonstrates that the French far right has developed a form 'patriotic ecology' that can be interpreted in different ways. Through an analysis of their programmes for the 2022 presidential campaign, the article contrasts the archetypical way Zemmour depicted environmental issues by mobilising the classic far-right tropes about the environment while Le Pen engaged with them in much more modern and sophisticated way to depict herself as more in touch with the contemporary zeitgeist. Finally, it concludes with a discussion on the ideological plasticity of the far right and the need to address its versatility in appropriating issues beyond its ideological core.

Keywords: Patriotic ecology; Far-right; Environment; Le Pen; Zemmour

## Résumé

L'extrême droite française est historiquement tiraillée entre deux stratégies qui se sont opposées lors de la campagne présidentielle de 2022, une ligne moderniste incarnée par le Rassemblement National de Marine Le Pen et une ligne traditionaliste représentée par Reconquête d'Éric Zemmour. Cet article examine plus particulièrement la manière dont les différences entre les lignes modernistes et traditionalistes se sont exprimées sur le thème des enjeux environnementaux. En effet, alors que les questions écologiques ont longtemps été considérées comme le domaine exclusif de la gauche, l'importance croissante de la crise climatique signifie que les politiciens de l'ensemble du spectre politique ont donné leur propre point de vue sur les questions écologiques. S'appuyant sur une tradition profonde de pensée conservatrice et nationaliste sur l'environnement, cet article démontre que l'extrême droite française a développé une forme d'« écologie patriotique » qui peut être interprétée de différentes manières. A travers une analyse de leurs programmes pour la campagne présidentielle de 2022, l'article oppose la façon archétypique dont Zemmour a mobilisé les questions environnementales en employant les tropes classiques de l'extrême droite sur l'environnement alors que Le Pen évoque les enjeux environnementaux d'une manière beaucoup plus moderne et sophistiquée pour se dépeindre comme plus en phase avec le zeitgeist contemporain. Enfin, l'article se termine par une discussion sur la plasticité idéologique de l'extrême droite et sur la nécessité d'aborder sa polyvalence en s'appropriant des questions qui dépassent son noyau idéologique.

Mots-clés : écologie patriotique ; extrême-droite ; environnement ; Le Pen ; Zemmour

## Introduction

Never had the far right been so close to power in France than in 2024. After the defeat of his party in the European elections on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, French president Emmanuel Macron announced that he would dissolve the National Assembly, which led to snap elections three weeks after. In the first round of these legislative elections, the National Rally (RN), the main far-right party in France, and its allies obtained a record-breaking 33.2% of the vote, more than 11 million votes, which polls anticipated to turn into a majority of Members of Parliament (MPs) ranging from 230 to 280. Because left-wing parties, united into a coalition named the New Popular Front (NFP), and the presidential camp pursued a strategy of "republican front", the far right only obtained 143 seats of MPs with the left-wing coalition becoming the unexpected leading power in the French parliament with 182 seats.

But even though the tactical voting strategy prevented the National Rally from reaching power after these elections, it remains undeniable that the French far right is electorally stronger than ever and is currently on an upward trajectory, with even the disappointing result of 143 MPs improving on the 89 MPs the RN obtained in the 2022 legislative elections, which already was a tenfold increase from the previous legislative tenure of 2017 where the party was only represented by 8 MPs. Looking beyond the legislative elections, one can also see by considering the presidential and European elections that although the RN has cemented its hegemonic position within the French far right, its leadership is contested by *Reconquête* (Reconquest), a younger political party characterised by its more reactionary ideological line. In the highly personalised

context of French politics, this rivalry has found its embodiment in the rivalry between Marine Le Pen, former president and leading figure of the RN, and Éric Zemmour, founder and president of *Reconquête*, who reached its peak during the 2022 presidential campaigns.

There are many factors accounting for the undeniable and unprecedented electoral rise of the far right in France, including a favourable mediatic ecosystem, a rejection of Macron's vertical style of government, the mainstreaming of far-right ideas among other political forces as well as the internal dynamics at play within the French far right. Nevertheless, this article focuses on that last contextual element: the tension, but ultimately the complementarity, between two strategic visions of the French far right. The first one, called the "modernist" line (Stockemer 2017: 23), is based on the premise that the only way for the far right to leave marginality is to soften its image, shed its most polarising and controversial ideas and appeal broadly to the people. The second one, dubbed the "traditionalist" line (Shields 2007: 278), believes that the appeal of the far right lies in the radicality and distinctiveness of its political offer and that electoral success will come by infusing the political mainstream with these ideas.

This article more specifically examines the way this tension between the modernist and traditionalist lines is expressed when it comes to the topic of environmental concerns. Indeed, while ecological issues have long been associated with the political left, particularly green parties, the increasing salience of the climate crisis means that political actors across the political spectrum have been forced to address the topic. Furthermore, although the environment is usually a peripheral concern for far-right politicians – especially compared to their core issues like immigration, identity and security – there is a long tradition of conservative and nationalist actors mobilising nature and rurality to claim an innate connection between the land and its inhabitants (Forchtner 2019). This hence means that there is a distinctively far-right interpretation of political ecology, a form of 'patriotic ecology' which can be mobilised in different ways depending on the strategy pursued. The research questions associated with this paper are thus the following: how do the main political actors of the French far right mobilise ecological themes? How do the differences between the traditionalist and modernist strategies impact the way this 'patriotic ecology' gets articulated in their discourse?

In the context of this special issue on dis/misinformation, the issue of this far-right interpretation of ecology is particularly salient. More than a challenge to the notion of issue ownership of the environment, this 'alternative' interpretation of environmental concerns also serves as a foundation of a counter-narrative that minimises the threat of the climate crisis and delays the adoption of urgently needed measures. Understanding its foundations and logic is fundamental to showcase its contradictions and combat it.

This article is structured in the following way. Firstly, it provides an overview of the state of the French far right, focusing on the context of the 2022 elections, by further developing the historical divide between modernist and traditionalist strategies. As the contemporary embodiments of this divide, the article then introduces Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in the context of French politics, briefly describing their respective journeys, personal and professional backgrounds as well as their rise to political prominence leading up to the 2022 presidential elections.

Secondly, the article conducts a qualitative discourse analysis of their respective presidential programmes – entitled "*Pour que la France reste la France*" ('So that France remains France') for Zemmour and "*M La France*" ('Love France', with the letter 'M', the initial of Le Pen's first name Marine, acting as a homophone for "*aime*" [love]) – and more specifically the sections dedicated to environmental issues to showcase the different ways each actor mobilises the aforementioned 'patriotic ecology'.

Finally, this article concludes with a discussion extending the findings of this analysis beyond its case study to showcase the importance of understanding the diversity of strategies within the far right for the scholarship to capture its evolution and growing appeal. Contextualising far-right discourse also enables for a more nuanced perspective on the internal struggles between the actors developing them.

## **1 – The opposition between modernist and traditional strategies in contemporary French politics: the duel between Le Pen and Zemmour**

In this section I will provide the context to the empirical case of the 2022 presidential elections in France. Although the far right in France is a complex ecosystem made of a variety of collective actors – from political parties like the RN, *Debout la France* (France Arise) or *Reconquête* to media like CNews and online communities like *Fdesouche* as well as extreme groups formed around Christian fundamentalism like *Civitas* or Monarchism like *Action Française* (French Action) – I wanted to focus particularly on a tension that is particularly central within the French radical right.

In the introduction, I discussed the long-standing opposition between a modernist and a traditionalist line within the French far right which has a complex history (Mayer 2018) extending over decades. Especially given the political discredit of the far right after the atrocities of World War 2, the tension between preserving the radicality of one's beliefs and seeking wider acceptance has been at the heart of the internal struggles within every far-right movement. It was notably embodied by several high-profile duels that tore the *Front National* (FN, the previous name of the RN until 2018) apart. In one of the major historic disputes within the FN, Bruno Mégret – a key figure who sought to modernise the party's ideological doctrine – openly clashed in 1999 with its historic leader Jean-Marie Le Pen (who was himself chosen as the face of the party in 1972 because he was more moderate than other far-right figures), claiming that his transgressive posturing would never lead to electoral success (Shields 2007: 276-281). Mégret was eventually cast aside, departing with a substantial part of the leadership of the party, leaving the traditional line in a dominant position.

Later, the modernist line contested that hegemony as this divide re-emerged during the Tours congress in 2011 which determined who would succeed the founding leader between his youngest daughter, Marine Le Pen, on the promise to make the FN "a party like any other", and his heir apparent, Bruno Gollnisch, who represented the old guard of the party (Albertini and Doucet 2014: 265-294). After winning the Tours congress and becoming president of the party, Marine Le Pen established her modernist line as the dominant strategy of the French far right, through a process described as "*dédiabolisation*" (de-demonisation) and silencing opposition within the party. her

As internal challenges seemed doomed to fail within the party, the perspective of a successful comeback from the traditionalist line unsurprisingly came from an outsider: Éric Zemmour. A conservative pundit in the media eye, Zemmour's voice in the far right was influential and his meteoric rise troubled the predictable return duel between Macron and Le Pen. Through his strategy of "*union des droites*" (union of the right-wing), He sought to tear down the boundary between conservative right and far right, and even challenged the hegemony of Le Pen in her own camp. The personalistic structure of French politics has thus led these

two politicians to become the most well-known and successful figures from this political camp. Even if Le Pen seemingly remains the more prominent of the two as of 2024, their opposition does reflect a major strategic divide on how the far right can gain power, which is why the following section provides crucial background information about them before delving into the analysis of their programme on environmental issues.

### *Marine Le Pen*

Since the 1970s, one of the most recognisable names in French politics is Le Pen. This is due to the political career of Jean-Marie Le Pen who was one of the founders of the then FN in 1972. Nicknamed the 'Devil of the Republic', his relentless attacks on immigration accompanied by a plethora of antisemitic and racist comments made him a pariah in the French mainstream, while his provocative behaviour turned him into a beloved figure of the far right.

Marine Le Pen is his youngest daughter and undoubtedly his political heiress. A lawyer by training, she formally joined the FN in 1986, steadily rising through the ranks of the party, facing internal accusations of nepotism but solidifying her position as a rising star of the party as she established herself as a central figure through the modernising strategy of *dédiabolisation* seeking to bring the FN into the political mainstream. To do so, she pushed the party away from the 'far right' label by taming its divisive rhetoric, condemning overt racism and antisemitism while also trying to soften the aggressive image of her father. At 81, Jean-Marie Le Pen eventually declared his intention to resign from the presidency of the FN, which led to the aforementioned Tours Congress in 2011 where Marine Le Pen was elected with more than two third of the votes, asserting the dominance of her modernist line. As she acquired more control over both her image and that of the FN, Le Pen developed a more professional outlook to political campaigning, presenting her party as "both right and left"<sup>1</sup> (Prat de Seabra 2016) and herself as a young and modern leader.

After excluding her father following yet another revisionist declaration on the Holocaust, Le Pen emphasised the personalistic dimension of her leadership by distancing herself from her divisive surname. Instead, she played along to the sexist trope of female politicians being defined by their first name, encouraging references to herself as simply 'Marine' (Matonti 2013). This was most visible in her 2012 bid to coalesce smaller far-right candidates around her '*Rassemblement Bleu Marine*' (Navy-Blue Rally) playing on the polysemy of her first name which also stands for 'navy' blue. While this was criticised internally as a sign that the FN was becoming a dynastic party, Le Pen emphasised her femininity and ordinariness, to humanise and soften her image.

Inspired by Donald Trump's unexpected breakthrough in 2016 and influenced by her then right-hand man, Florian Philippot, Le Pen fully embraced the populist style (Moffitt 2016) in her 2017 campaign, with her far-right agenda entirely recast as a struggle by the people against an unresponsive elite. From her motto, "*Au nom du peuple*" ('In the name of the people'), to her sustained anti-establishment rhetoric, Le Pen's campaign heavily played on this antagonism to develop the image of a relatable outsider that would defend the people against an elite that would let France succumb to "mass immigration".

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from French to English are my own.

Although Le Pen's 2017 results ended up becoming a record performance for her party, the end of her campaign was tainted by her catastrophic performance in the debate with Macron during the runoff where she looked aggressive and unprepared. In preparation of the 2022 campaign, she persevered in her strategy of normalisation, the most visible illustration of which was the name change of the party in June 2018, which abandoned the divisive and combative connotations of *'Front'* to become the more inclusive *'Rassemblement'* (Rally), thus solidifying yet again her choice to defend her modernist strategy.

### *Éric Zemmour*

Unlike Le Pen, whose background is rooted in electoral politics, Éric Zemmour is not a career politician. Although he did study at *Sciences Po Paris* (the Paris Institute of Political Studies), just like most of the French political elites, his career is that of a journalist. A household name in France, Zemmour has commonly been described as a *polémiste* (polemicist): a media personality invited for his controversial opinions. While he started his public career as a political journalist for the conservative daily newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1996, it was his move to talk shows where his transgressive quips created countless controversies that made him a popular media figure. Moreover, his output as a conservative essayist, notably *Le premier sexe* (The first sex) in 2006 and *Suicide français* (French suicide) in 2014, granted him the reputation of an influential right-wing thinker, unwavering and explicit in his anti-feminism, xenophobia, and overall reactionary beliefs.

Zemmour has always been a loud critic of Marine Le Pen, both personally and politically. A few days after Le Pen's defeat in the 2017 runoff, Zemmour targeted scathing criticisms toward her, describing her campaign as a "complete debacle" and comparing her to a "reverse Midas" that "turned into lead all the gold she was touching" (Zemmour 2017). He later argued that her quest to 'de-demonise' her party had led her astray from the fundamentals of the far right. In June 2021, after RN's underwhelming showing in regional elections, Zemmour claimed that her father used to offer "a different type of politics, for better or for worse, but at least it was original" whereas Marine Le Pen was becoming a centrist "speaking like Macron". Against what he saw as a "radicalization, a hardening" of the far-right electorate, he said that Le Pen's blind persistence at softening the RN was "a surrender" and "a betrayal" for which her voters would "make her pay" (Johannès 2021). Using the platform provided by conservative billionaire Vincent Bolloré with CNews, which aspired to become 'France's Fox News', Zemmour launched a personalistic party, *Reconquête*, and developed a unique media presence, soon driving a wedge within Le Pen's electorate with polls placing him at around 15% of the shares of the voting intentions.

In addition to this ideological hardening and his choice to go back to the fundamentals of far-right ideology for which he had become famous, another central component of Zemmour's traditionalist line was a wider strategic orientation that contradicted Le Pen's strategy. Indeed, the RN's choice to blur ideological lines was notably aimed at developing its appeal towards working-class voters disappointed by the socialist party, combining promises of improved social welfare and security with a firm stance on immigration and Islam. Conversely, Zemmour advocated for a strategy of "*union des droites*" (union of the right-wings) that condemned the left-wing turn Le Pen had allegedly taken in pursuit of the popular classes. In his perspective, diluting her programme with social promises was an ideological betrayal while the real path to victory lied for him in breaking down the boundary between the mainstream right, represented in France by *Les*

*Républicains* (‘the Republicans’), and radical-right parties like RN or his own *Reconquête*. Given the steady hardening of representatives of the French mainstream right, particularly as their representatives introduced themes and policies usually defended by their far-right counterparts (Mondon 2014), Zemmour’s aspiration was to appeal to the more bourgeois electorate of the right and convince them of the relevance and seriousness of his traditionalist line, particularly compared to the more popular appeal of Le Pen’s RN<sup>2</sup>. Propelled by his mediatic momentum, Zemmour attracted a steady stream of increasingly prominent RN figures to his side. By far, the most impactful of these defections was that of Marion Maréchal, Le Pen’s niece and a rising star within the RN who had unsuccessfully sought to advance a more traditionalist line than her aunt. Officially “retired” to focus on other means to advance her agenda, including the creation of a ‘school’ to train future conservative politicians, Maréchal chose to return to the heart of the political campaign to support Zemmour’s campaign. In the wake of this “betrayal”, Le Pen described Maréchal’s choice not to support her as “brutal, violent, and difficult,” particularly since “[she] raised her with [her] sister in the first years of her life” (Fresard 2022). Framing Maréchal’s decision through the personal lens of familial conflict allowed her to avoid addressing the political reasons for this departure and minimise its impact on her own troops, but it did demonstrate the vitality of the opposition to Le Pen’s modernist line within the French far right. This tension between traditionalist and modernist strategies has ideological ramifications in many key areas of the discourse of the far right, from the framing of national identity to the importance of social policies, but it is particularly salient in the way far-right politicians frame their relationship to the environment.

## 2 – ‘Patriotic ecology’ during the 2022 presidential election

### *The tenets of far-right environmentalism*

Before examining the way Le Pen and Zemmour each integrated green politics within their programmes, it is important to take a step back and discuss more generally the connections between the far right and the environment. Historically, ecological issues emerged in progressive circles and were advanced in the public debate by the various green parties which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, like PEOPLE in the United Kingdom or the *Grünen* in Germany. With the rising salience of the climate crisis, environmental concerns were then also integrated into the agendas of other left-wing parties and reached the political mainstream to the point that most parties have begun addressing the issue and dedicated parts of their programme to ecological concerns. Far-right parties throughout the world have often been late adopters of these issues, prioritising their core topics of national sovereignty, anti-immigration, security and social conservatism over the environment. However, a distinctive type of far-right environmentalism has steadily emerged in the public discourse based on a deeper tradition of nationalist and conservative thought emphasising the connection between society and nature.

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<sup>2</sup> While this is going beyond the case study at hand, the alliance in 2024 between the president of *Les Républicains*, Éric Ciotti, and the RN during the snap legislative elections showcased that Zemmour’s strategy was somewhat successful. Ironically, it was not his party that benefited from this alliance, but rather Le Pen’s, showing as will be discussed below the complementarity in the long run between these two strategies.

As Rakdau (2014) demonstrated, concerns for the natural environment are not a novelty of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but can rather be traced back to the artistic and intellectual movement of Romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century where the uniqueness and diversity of natural landscapes were framed as a source of pride and beauty. To summarise this complex history briefly, this thinking spilled over into the political development of nationalism which romanticised the unique connection between a land and the people inhabiting it. Conservative interpretations of nationalism, which provide the backbone of far-right ideology, connected this focus on the particular beauty of the land with a vision of nature as “seemingly stable and orderly, with different species in different habitats” (Forchtner 2019: 4), made up of close ecosystems that ought to be protected from outside influences, whether it is change or invasive species. It is easy to see how this romanticised and essentialized depiction of nature can lead to parallels with the social world, with a particularly defined people needing to be protected from outsiders. This parallel was precisely the one made by Nazi ideologist Darré who coined the infamous expression of “*Blut und Boden*” (‘Blood and Soil’), a slogan depicting a romanticised vision of a pure, rural, and racially homogeneous society, where the German people were seen as inherently connected to their native soil. In this racist perspective tied to the concept of “*Lebensraum*” (‘Living space’), the German nation becomes embedded in its territory which ought to be preserved and protected from ‘external’ influences, thus justifying the violent and permanent removal of any part of the population that would be considered non-Aryan.

With the defeat of the Nazis at the end of World War 2, these ideas connecting ‘blood and soil’ were seemingly vanquished until the intellectual contributions of the *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1970s which introduced the seemingly more acceptable concept of ethnopluralism (Camus & Lebourg 2017: 130), an alternative to the discredited concept of race mobilising an essentialized understanding of culture. What this cultural turn of racism (Rueda 2021) implies is that “nature, landscape and soil are significant – though no longer simply in the sense of a biological connection between land and people (‘blood and soil’), but in a symbolic way.” (Forchtner 2019: 4). This thus means that far-right actors mobilising the tenets of the *Nouvelle Droite* build a connection between a closed and exclusionary understanding of the nation and the natural territory where this nation is allegedly ‘rooted’, without facing the accusation of racism associated with earlier forms of ‘blood and soil’ nationalism.

In turn, what this modernisation of far-right discourse implies is a revised form of far-right environmentalism which is embedded in both nationalism and conservatism. Olsen (1999) highlights three core components to the way far-right actors conceptualise the environment. Firstly, *eco-naturalism*, that is a romanticised depiction of nature as a pure and untouched entity that must be protected from outside influences and modernity. The environment is reduced to a static portrayal from an idealised past, understood as a precious heritage that ought to be preserved for the conservation of the traditional values of the nation. This also accounts for the far-right focus on agrarian themes, accentuating the importance of the domestication of nature, albeit in a more pastoral than industrial lens. Secondly, *eco-organicism* relates to the organicist (Camus & Lebourg 2017: 21) vision of society at the heart of far-right ideology. In this perspective, society, particularly in the context of the nation, is like a living ecosystem which is structured in the same way as the natural world, with all parts serving a functional purpose and working harmoniously with one another. This comes with a justification of hierarchies in the political order, a romanticisation of the distant past and a concern with extending the purity of the social ecosystem by preventing foreign interventions. Thirdly and finally, *eco-authoritarianism* consists in the belief that protecting the environment can only be conducted by

strong and centralised power. Democratic processes are seen here as inefficient and slow, which means only a strong state can and should intervene to protect and preserve the environment.

From these three tenets, Forchtner & Kølvrå (2015) argue that far-right political actors make sense of environmental concerns through three dimensions. The first one is *aesthetic*, that is seeing nature as something that should be enjoyed, rooted in the Romantic ideal of nature's unspoiled beauty, before modernity affected it. In their discourse, far-right politicians do not mobilise "all forms of nature present in a given territory, rather only those selected to represent the beauty of the homeland emblematically" (*ibid.*: 204), such as national parks and iconic landscapes, and criticise changes if they are considered to spoil the beauty of nature, like wind turbines. The second way the far right makes sense of the environment is *symbolic*, particularly as it is "implicated in a community's claim to primacy and sovereignty in relation to a particular section of the earth's surface, and thus the construction of its cultural difference from other communities" (*ibid.*) This relates to both eco-organicism and ethnopluralism, the belief that the land where a people builds their society is deeply connected to what makes it unique. This essentialized and static depiction of nature hence serves as a claim to build the foundation of what separates 'us', born and raised in a specific place, from 'them', who come from elsewhere and whose values and mores may be incompatible with the social order. Thirdly, going back to a more pragmatic dimension, the environment is also understood by the far right in a *material* way, in terms of "its ability to deliver resources or raw materials for consumption" (*ibid.*: 206). The environment is thus not merely seen as the foundation of what creates national character, it is also fundamental to maintain an ideal of self-sufficiency, or at the very least autonomy, in an increasingly unstable and globalised world. It is this material perspective that explains why the far right vehemently defends local industries and opposes any kind of reliance on foreign products. These policies are thus not primarily advocated out of ecological concerns relating to carbon footprint but instead defended with the ambition of maintaining a form of sovereignty and avoiding dependence on foreign powers.

This is precisely where these tenets of far-right environmentalism intersect with the topic of dis/misinformation as they contribute to what Lamb *et al.* (2020) described as the wider "discourses of climate delay" about the climate crisis. In a remarkable typological effort, they isolated four main categories of such discourse: (1) discourse redirecting responsibility, including whataboutism and calls for others to take actions; (2) discourse pushing for non-transformative solutions, including technological optimism and fossil-fuel based solutionism; (3) discourse emphasising the downside of climate policies, including appeals to well-being and policy perfectionism; and discourse surrendering to the climate crisis, from framing change as impossible to accepting eventual doom. As was already hinted at above, the patriotic ecology of the far right is conservative and backward-looking which implies that it does not aspire to the kind of transformational changes that most other forms of political ecology call for. However, its current use by far-right politicians is more sophisticated than earlier forms of climate denialism or scepticism because it superficially seems to care about the environment and address environmental concerns. The answers patriotic ecology provides can thus be framed as a form of misinformation that minimises the need for radical change and discredit less conservative forms of environmentalism. In the case study below, I will thus discuss the differences between the ways Zemmour and Le Pen mobilise this far-right environmentalism in their respective programmes. while simultaneously connecting it to the various "discourses of climate delay" mentioned above.

### *Case selection and methods*

Before delving into the empirical analysis, it is important to take a step back to discuss the methodology informing this article. As was developed at length in the previous section, selecting Le Pen and Zemmour as the two cases for this comparative case study stems from not only from their electoral salience but also prominence in the French political scene. In addition to being the leading figures of the far right during the presidential elections, they both embodied the cleavage between modernist and traditionalist line that is at the heart of this article's argument.

To engage more specifically with the way Zemmour and Le Pen developed ecological themes in their programme, this article conducted a critical thematic analysis, a type of discourse analysis that is part of a wider tradition of qualitative research called thematic analysis, which Clarke & Braun (2017: 297) described as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data". What distinguishes thematic analysis from other forms of discourse analysis is its focus on themes, as 'patterns of meaning' emerging from a source, which was particularly fitting to explore the categories discussed above based on Olsen's (1999) work – eco-naturalism, eco-organicism and eco-authoritarianism – and Forchtner & Kølvrå's (2015) typology of the ways the far right approaches the environment – aesthetic, symbolic and material. However, it is also important to stress that this article is based on a *critical* thematic analysis, which differentiates itself from positivist forms of thematic analysis by examining the way "the patterned results are connected to larger social ideologies, linking frequency and forcefulness to the influence of dominant social discourses" (Lawless & Chen 2019: 4–5). Indeed, given this article's focus on far-right ideology and its implications on political communication, it was fundamental to approach these themes critically.

Critical thematic analysis can be conducted in either an inductive or deductive way, but because of the theoretical choice to remain grounded in previously established themes, this article adopted a deductive reasoning, examining the way the concepts highlighted by Olsen and Forchtner & Kølvrå's were mobilised in the discourses analysed. More specifically, the analysis conducted here examined the presence of each of these themes in the programmes of both politicians, using multiple sources including their general manifesto, specialised booklets and lists of key policies. Each of these sources are freely available online and a link for each of them can be found in the list of references.

### *Zemmour and environmental issues: an archetypical example of patriotic ecology*

When reading Zemmour's programme for the 2022 presidential campaign, "So that France remains France" (Zemmour 2022), the first observation that needs to be made is that the topic of the environment is relatively minor. In a booklet that is 73-page long, his programme only has two pages fully dedicated to the environment, as part of a small subsection [56-58] in the third and final section, "Reconquering our way of life and our fraternity" [56-66]. Furthermore, environmental issues are not even mentioned in the introduction that sets the tone of the entire political project, which demonstrates again that ecological issues in his campaign are secondary at best in contrast to more central issues like identity and sovereignty. More

than this, for Zemmour, the environment is also subsumed within the larger topic of rurality [54-55], as can be seen in his proposal to “create a large Ministry for Rurality, Agriculture and Coastal Areas, bringing together Rurality, Agriculture, the Environment, Biodiversity and Hunting, Fishing and Forestry” [54].

Indeed, this article discussed earlier the importance of rurality in the far-right imaginary and the reason why it is so central in its discourse on environmental issues. Zemmour’s campaign perfectly illustrates this and allows for a deeper discussion on the rationale behind the connection between a pastoral vision of nature and national identity. When he promises to “bring life back in our countryside” [54], one can first pick up some populist undertones opposing ‘the real people’ living in rural areas in opposition to a political elite that has neglected them. Introducing the classic theme in the French far right of the dangerous *banlieues*, he for instance claims that “some suburbs have been privileged at the expense of rural areas that are of no interest to those who have governed us until now” [54], pitting the underprivileged people of the suburbs against those of the countryside by claiming the former have been favoured by the political elite at the expense of the latter. Given the xenophobic and Islamophobic undertones of focusing on the *banlieues*, which remain primarily inhabited by people from Northern African ascent, this is yet another example of the way far-right discourse combines the populist frame of the people as underdog with an exclusionary nationalist lens (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017) by connecting the political elite with a ‘problematic’ outgroup, here those from the suburbs.

But outside of the populist framing, the countryside has a particular symbolic importance for Zemmour who describes it as “the guardian of our traditions and memory” as well as “the heart of our national identity and collective imagination” [54]. This goes back to what Forchtner & Kølvråa (2015) called the symbolic way for the far right to consider the environment, depicting a special connection between the land and the people inhabiting it which constitutes the foundations of national identity. Here, Zemmour is particularly explicit about it, relying on a romanticised portrayal of the countryside to which “we owe a debt” and “without which France would not be France” [54]. He frames the countryside as being neglected and even under “attack”, which implies a need to “urgently revitalise it” because “the very soul of France is at stake” [54]. What is implied here is that the vitality of France’s identity does not stem from its modern cities but rather from the small “villages that tell our history” [54].

In addition to this symbolic role of the rural areas as the “heart of France’s identity”, Zemmour also repeatedly mobilises the environment in an aesthetic way, as can be seen in its subsection dedicated to “protecting the beauty of France” [56]. From this perspective that is both conservative and nationalist, the environment is a sort of legacy to be enjoyed and passed down to future generations. Zemmour precisely explains that his aim is to “pass on an environment that is both healthy and resplendent, which our children will be able to protect and bequeath in their turn” [56]. Practically speaking, this notably consists in putting an end to all wind farms projects that are “turning our landscapes ugly” [56], claiming in the section on nuclear energy that there is a need to “rationalise the development of renewable energies which should not be conducted at the expense of the balance of ecosystems, the beauty of our environment or our public finances” [31]. Alongside the argument of eco-naturalism in the form of defending the “balance” of nature and the pragmatic argument of financial restraint, the focus on the aesthetic value of the environment is noteworthy as it places this beauty at the same level as the more “reasonable” arguments he advances. Of course, the beauty of nature is highlighted in a very selective manner to represent the most emblematic parts of the “natural heritage” [42], including the “landscapes, forests and valleys that populate our national

subconscious" [54] with the intention of emphasising the importance of rural "*terroir*" over urbanised territories. Such an argument thus combines two types of discourses of climate delay, a discourse emphasising the downsides of any disruptive change, particularly to "balance" and to "the beauty of our environment", as well as a push for a non-transformative solution since what Zemmour practically offers is to limit any shift towards renewable energies and instead keep the current status quo of primarily relying on nuclear energy.

In sum, this conservative depiction of the environment serves as a way for Zemmour to define his brand of reactionary environmentalism that is rooted in the countryside as "the place where an authentically ecological way of life becomes possible, where Man and Nature coexist in a harmony shaped by centuries" [54]. As such, tackling environmental issues like the climate crisis is not a progressive process aimed at changing our habits but rather a return to traditions that is epitomised by the "rural way of life" [54]. In the programme, this patriotic vision of ecology is opposed to two other forms of ecologies that were "hijacked by ideology" [56]:

"First, [ecology] was punitive with the extreme left, when the latter despised all those French people who needed their car to get around or who needed nuclear power to reduce their electricity bill. Then, ecology became out of touch, disembodied and technocratic when our governments favoured global trade instead of developing the local and national economic fabric. I want to put an end to this double blindness by defending a pragmatic and rooted vision of ecology." [56]

While the "rooted" dimension of his ecology has already been tackled above, it is worth discussing more at length this notion of a "pragmatic" ecology that would allegedly be untainted from "ideology". Zemmour's claim is typical of conservative thought, based on a "distrust of abstract principles and philosophies, born out of a sceptical attitude towards rationalism [...] and progress", and for whom "ideology is thus equated with dogmatism: fixed or doctrinaire beliefs that are divorced from the complexities of the real world" (Heywood 2021: 6). However, even though the quote mentioned above criticises other visions of ecology as overly technocratic, Zemmour relies on a similar trope to justify his policies and conceal his ideological choices, particularly when he claims that his "ecology will be one that draws on the latest innovations from our scientists to protect the environment", that he will put an end to "unreasonable subsidies for intermittent renewable energies" and "develop credible and sustainable alternatives to hydrocarbons" [56]. This is an example of technological optimism, another form of discourse of climate delay that pushes non-transformative solutions by relying on a vague call to innovation and solutions that have yet to be invented. These multiple references to reason and science, as well as his arguments from authority, are an attempt at pretending that his patriotic environmentalism is pragmatic and free from ideological biases. Nevertheless, in the conclusion of the section of his programme on the environment, he goes back to combining both symbolic, aesthetic and pragmatic arguments into one statement of intent:

"While promoting the latest technologies to reduce CO2 emissions, I will vigorously defend any attack on the beauty and integrity of our natural heritage, which is one of the richest in Europe: our mountains, rivers and forests must be protected as they should be, because they are also part of France's identity." [56]

In addition to these three aspects, the last major component of Zemmour's conception of the environment relates to its material dimension, and particularly the loss in sovereignty that the climate crisis is causing. In this regard, he proclaims his ambition to "strengthen" and even "defend our energy sovereignty" because "our strategic independence and the fight against global warming are at stake" [31]. This defence of sovereignty is particularly crucial in the nationalist perspective informing Zemmour's ideology and its importance spills over into environmental issues. As a result, he goes back to a classic argument for right-wing politicians in France, going as far back as De Gaulle, which associates nuclear power with independence and sovereignty. But emulating the discourse found in most other right-wing parties, Zemmour frames this issue in environmentally friendly terms, describing nuclear power as "a low-carbon energy", "and therefore good for the climate" as well as *the* "main tool in the fight against global warming" [31]. Again, this contributes to a wider discourse of climate delay that justifies the status quo and diverts attention away from transformative policies.

A final point worth mentioning in this material perspective on the environment pertains to Zemmour's stance on legal norms, and particularly environmental ones. On the one hand, he promises to "put an end to excessive standards and constraints, so that farmers can produce better without being penalised by unfair foreign competition" [33]. But on the other hand, he repeatedly mentions France's "social and environmental norms" as a protection against foreign goods produced in conditions" [25] that do not respect these norms, criticising them again as "unfair competition" and claiming that these "imports should be penalised by demanding the quick implementation on a European level of a carbon footprint at our borders" [26]. What can be drawn from this seemingly contradictory position is that, for Zemmour, environmental norms or measures such as a carbon footprint tax are not primarily valuable for their impact on the climate, they are useful in as much as they can be used as tools to protect local goods against foreign competition.

In sum, Zemmour's stance on ecological issues during the 2022 campaign is completely archetypical of what would be expected from a traditional far-right candidate: depicting the countryside as the heart of France's national identity, focusing on preserving the aesthetic value of the environment as a legacy for future generations, framing his policies as pragmatic in opposition to the "punitive" ecology of his left-wing rivals and defending the sovereignty of the country by describing nuclear power as greener than renewable energies. Nevertheless, although this analysis demonstrated in detail the conservative and nationalist influences in his environmental stances, the main observation to be made remains how secondary and subsidiary this issue is in Zemmour's programme, treated in much more superficial manner than more 'core' issues for him, like immigration and security. Furthermore, under the guise of being environmentally friendly, most of the measures advocated here only constitute a prolongation of the status quo with no acknowledgement of the human causes of the climate crisis and how to tackle them, not even a mention of France's commitments in the Paris agreement. Instead, Zemmour offers a step backwards, especially when it comes to renewable energies, by depicting a romanticised depiction of a pastoral countryside as the only "place where an authentically ecological way of life becomes possible" [54]. As we will see in the following section, Le Pen treads a similar path with her environmental stances but tackles the issue much more extensively and frames it in way that is less openly reactionary and more attuned to contemporary sensibilities.

*Le Pen and environmental issues: a modernised interpretation of patriotic ecology*

In contrast to Zemmour whose programme was contained within one single document, Le Pen's campaign team had prepared various ones: a 38-page long manifesto summarising the main orientations of her programme (Le Pen 2022a), a list of the top 22 policies she seeks to implement after the 2022 campaign (Le Pen 2022b) and a set of 15 thematic booklets each focused on a specific aspect of the programme. It is noteworthy here that Le Pen not only dedicated an entire 18-page long thematic booklet to the environment (Le Pen 2022c), she placed it in second position on her campaign website, right after a booklet on digital issues and long before more expected issues like 'security' and 'immigration control' which were respectively in eleventh and thirteenth place<sup>3</sup>. This strategic choice illustrates a willingness from Le Pen to appear in touch with current concerns, showing to prospective voters that she represents more than a single-issue party and takes issues like the climate crisis seriously.

Nevertheless, this apparent attempt at diversifying does not dissimulate the fact that environmental issues are not particularly central in her programme. Indeed, among Le Pen's "22 policies for 2022", only one is indirectly linked to the environment, the twelfth one which promises to "ensure our energy independence to lower bills for the French" [5] and mentions nuclear energy as well as renewable energies. As in Zemmour's case, the issue of the environment is here reduced to a choice of energy and framed both as a key part in maintaining France's sovereignty and a pragmatic choice to cut electricity bills, delaying transformative environmental policies by framing the status quo as the only 'reasonable' option.

Furthermore, environmental issues only have a minor role in the main manifesto, being primarily mentioned here alongside energy and agricultural policies. However, unlike Zemmour who did not even include the topic, she does mention the climate crisis in her introduction, and more specifically "climatic upheavals" (*bouleversements climatiques*), as part of "the great challenges of the coming decades" which "will have a major impact on the world economy", alongside "the increasing scarcity of raw materials" [4] – which acts as a point of connection with the material dimension of the environment, more specifically the need for sovereignty – and the acceleration of migratory tensions, framed as a consequence of the climate crisis.

Such a mention is particularly significant because, as illustrated by the case of Zemmour, many far-right politicians acknowledge global warming in a disconnected manner, but here Le Pen explicitly relates it to two other central concerns for her – sovereignty and immigration – and acknowledges the dramatic impact of the crisis through the choice of the word "upheaval". She goes further than this when she recognises the need to "finance the ecological transformation expected by our fellow citizens" [22], connecting her policies with the concerns of her prospective voters. This is even taken further in the booklet on ecology, where she clearly acknowledges the human cause of the climate crisis, which Zemmour never even mentioned, as she uses of the expression of "Anthropocene" [14], a scientific expression used to refer to the first epoch in the history of the world primarily shaped by human activities.

Going back to the main manifesto, what appears in contrast with these more progressive acknowledgements is that the environment remains a secondary concern, mentioned in passing rather than integrated throughout the programme. As such, even though she goes further than her far-right rival, Le Pen does not place political ecology at the centre of her project. When one considers these brief mentions of

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<sup>3</sup> Even though the thematic booklet on immigration control was placed lower down the list, it is worth noting that it is 46-page long, more than twice as long as every other thematic booklet and even longer than the general manifesto. This demonstrates the continued centrality of the theme of immigration for Le Pen and her party.

environmental issues in the manifesto, very similar themes to the ones discussed in Zemmour's programme emerge: a green framing on nuclear power which she aims to turn into "the backbone of our energy policy, to the benefit of consumers and the fight against global warming" [25]; criticism of wind turbines whose "proliferation" constitutes a "real scandal" [25]; a passing reference to the aesthetic issues wind turbines cause in terms of "visual and noise nuisance inflicted on our fellow citizens" [25]; an ambivalence about "environmental norms" which ought to be "adapted to the local circumstances" because they are "all too often completely out of touch with reality" [20]; conversely a depiction of her policies, particularly on agriculture and energy, as "common-sensical" (*de bon sens*) [26]; and a call to save farms in the countryside as "an integral part of our heritage and our civilisation" (p.). Le Pen's patriotic ecology thus contributes to the same kinds of discourses of climate delay as Zemmour's: pushing for non-transformative solutions, emphasising the downsides of any radical policy and overall defending the current status quo or even going back on some points like renewable energies.

There are however two noteworthy novelties, starting with a brief mention of the need to subsidise "plant-based proteins" (*protéines végétales*) [26], an expression that comes from left-wing urban circles sensitised to issues of vegetarianism that is rather unexpected in the core manifesto of Le Pen's programme. More importantly, Le Pen introduces the concept of "localism" [21], the political choice to prioritise the purchase and consumption of local products. This innovation, which was developed within the RN by Hervé Juvin, offers a 'patriotic twist' to the left-wing concern about eating local food to limit one's carbon footprint by framing it as an act of "economic patriotism" [21]. In the manifesto, Le Pen argues that "the choice of localism is more necessary than ever in terms of sovereignty, sustainable development and, of course, employment" [21], connecting here as well environmental concerns with wider issues like sovereignty and the economy.

Focusing more specifically on the thematic booklet "*M L'écologie*"; Le Pen claims that she "will make ecology one of the levers of national renewal" and that it is "at the heart of our political project" [3]. In the booklet, she details eleven major policies aiming to substantiate those claims by offering the outline of what she calls "a positive ecology that offers hope for everyone" [5], "the ecology of French *joie de vivre*" [3]... This focus on positivity, which is a recurring theme in her programme even beyond environmental issues, contributes to the wider 'de-demonisation' strategy through which Le Pen seeks to change her image and that of her party towards a more peaceful and less aggressive form of politics. While mobilising these positive emotions in her rhetoric, she conversely associates left-wing forms of political ecology with negative emotions. Implicitly targeting the French green party and its allies, she argues that "the ecological transition will not be achieved through fear, guilty conscience or punishment" [16]. This contributes to another form of discourse on climate delay, the focus on "no sticks, just carrots" (Lamb *et al.*: 4) which argue that any restrictive measure should be abandoned, and ecology should only be pursued in a 'positive way'. In a similar vein to Zemmour, but with a much more affective discourse she criticises a form of "punitive ecology" which has been "led astray by climate terrorism" and is thus "endangering the planet, national independence and, more importantly, the standard of living of the French people" [5].

Le Pen is also much more explicit than him about the dangers of what she successively calls "false ecology" [17], "off-the-ground ecology" (*écologie hors-sol*) or "misguided ecology" [6]. In her perspective, defenders of "ecologism" [7] are extremists acting against the will of the French citizens – "We will not let ecology stifle democracy. The transition will be wanted and chosen by the French people!" [6] – and put an

unnecessary burden of guilt on the French nation by calling for overly radical change. In her attempt to discredit every left-wing form of political ecology, she even caricatures its proponents as threats to the French way of life:

“Ecologism imposes multiple regressions on our collective gains, weakens our independence and claims to justify intolerable intrusions into our behaviour. Our freedoms will not be sacrificed in the name of a misguided ecology. The French will still be able to take their families out for a drive, take hot baths, enjoy a log fire in the fireplace and celebrate Christmas! We need to adapt our way of life, not abandon it!” [7]

In the thematic booklet, Le Pen also makes an argument that is typical of modern forms of climate scepticism. Rather than outright denial of the climate crisis, which is clearly acknowledged in her programme, what she advocates for is a combination of self-satisfactory complacency and a rejection of the blame onto others. This constitute a discourse of climate delay that seeks to redirect responsibility by relying on whataboutism, arguing that France’s efforts are already more than sufficient, and encouraging a ‘free rider’ attitude which justifies not making any further effort. For instance, after quoting a positive statistic about the air quality of French cities, Le Pen claims that “France is one of the five countries where the environment is least degraded” [5], implying that the current efforts of the country are already more than satisfying, which then leads her to argue that:

“France does not have to sacrifice the well-being of its population to correct the errors and abuses of other countries! It must play its part, all its part, but only its part, in the global ecological effort. We will rigorously follow the principle of an ecological transition that benefits the French people.” [6]

In contrast with these new themes that were absent or less developed in Zemmour’s programme, there are conversely topics found in his manifesto that are less dominant in Le Pen’s booklet. For instance, the programme includes a call to “bring new life in rural areas” [11], but there are no explicit mentions of the word ‘countryside’ or depictions of a romanticised pastoral lifestyle celebrated as particularly ecological. Similarly, Le Pen’s programme includes many references to the notions of transmission, seen as “a duty of civilisation” from “those who have been given a territory, those who owe France to the generations that preceded us” [17]. However, it would be hard to call this vision of ecology reactionary in the same way as Zemmour’s, particularly since there are fewer mentions of conservative themes like tradition, legacy or values in this part of the programme. On the contrary, this thematic booklet is surprisingly future-oriented, mentioning the youth and future generations in two of their eleven policy proposals: “developing environmental awareness and training from an early age” [14] and “creating a heritage national service” [15]. Even though her manifesto has a much more explicitly far-right tone, many of these policies in the thematic booklet, from improving the quality of air and water to monitoring the biodiversity of endangered ecosystems, can even be framed as progressive and could be found in the programmes of green parties. Although this analysis has so far emphasised the points of differences with Zemmour’s traditionalist programme, there are however shared themes which yet place Le Pen’s programme in the lineage of the far-right environmentalism outlined above. For instance, there are various references to a combination of eco-naturalism and eco-organicism, valuing the special qualities of the French territory, as can be seen in

the statement that “each ecosystem is unique, it's here and nowhere else” [6], and connecting them to the characteristics of the French nation. Indeed, Le Pen claims to embody an ecology “that preserves ecosystems, one that recreates the link between man and his territory, man and nature” [7]. Going back to the anti-immigration fundamentals of the far right, this argument is further developed as Le Pen makes the argument that “it is the populations united by a long presence on a territory that can claim their complicity with nature, this interdependence with the environment that makes up the diversity of human cultures, and which forced nomadism and mass migration are destroying without return” [8].

Because culture is seen as “the co-creation of a man and his ecosystem” [16], this then leads to the claim that “in France, culture is inseparable from nature, and the two form an inseparable part of our way of life. The beauty of France is as much down to nature as it is to the builders of bell towers, villages and bridges!” [15]. In these last statements, Le Pen describes nature in a symbolic way, directly connecting the land from the people inhabiting it in the tradition of ethnopluralism, but she also introduces the idea that nature is a source of pleasure and enjoyment. This aesthetic perspective is even more prominently developed in the introduction of the booklet:

“A beautiful, living and protected natural environment is the source of some of the deepest satisfactions that life has to offer. And the transition we are proposing consists first and foremost of taking France back from those who disfigure, plunder and pollute it! It is our common asset, our most precious heritage!” [5]

Finally, going back to the third component of Forchtner & Kølvrå's (2015) model on far-right environmentalism, Le Pen does also make various references to the environment in a material way. In the main manifesto, the topics of agriculture and localism were directly connected to the notion of food and economic sovereignty respectively. Even though, this latter expression is also absent from this thematic booklet, localism is presented as “the first lever of an ecological transition that will be a win-win for our prosperity and purchasing power and beneficial for the State budget, which will add nothing to the public debt, thanks to the financing by the sovereign wealth fund that we will create, and will not require anything from the taxpayer” [6].

By mobilising the economy as a key argument in favour of localism, Le Pen here emphasises the possibility to combine economic growth with ecological transition without any changes in behaviour from the consumer, outside of favouring local products.

Overall, Le Pen's inclusion of environmental issues in her programme is much more sustained and sophisticated than Zemmour's, which demonstrates a surprising willingness to engage with these topics that are less central in a programme that otherwise remains solidly rooted in far-right ideology. It also shows a better preparedness, or perhaps professionalisation, than in her previous campaigns where environmental issues were much less showcased. This can also be connected to the lineage of one of the signatures of Le Pen's discourse that differentiated her from other far-right actors in France, what Alduy & Wahnich (2015: 54-55) called “*gauchisme*” (‘leftism’): borrowing elements from left-wing ideologies while keeping the fundamentals of her nationalist and conservative core to sustain the idea of being “neither left nor right” or beyond this cleavage altogether.

## Conclusion

All in all, the analysis of Le Pen and Zemmour's programmes on environmental issues showcased the very specific way that far-right politicians interpret it by the yardstick of their ideology. Against the assumption of issue ownership of political ecology by the political left, and in particular by green parties and movements, this article built on the literature on the far right and the environment to demonstrate a distinctive way of addressing this topic in an electoral context. By discussing the characteristics of this 'patriotic ecology' while developing two different examples of the way it can be mobilised, it also showed the need for the literature to take seriously this appropriation of green themes by far-right politicians which will only become more sophisticated as the salience of the climate crisis grows.

Indeed, even though Zemmour perfectly exemplified the tenets of eco-naturalism, eco-organicism and eco-authoritarianism while engaging with nature in symbolic, aesthetic and material ways that were distinctively conservative and nationalist, Le Pen's case demonstrated her ability to blur ideological lines by adopting newly prominent topics without compromising on the fundamentals of her far-right ideology. Her inclusion of progressive policies, shift in focus from the past to the future and use of a highly affective register all contributed to making her programme appear more progressive than Zemmour, even though they were in practice particularly similar, especially it comes to nuclear power and the defence of national sovereignty. Further research needs to be done to establish whether this played a role in making her more electorally appealing than him during that campaign, but it undeniably showcases the differences between traditionalist and modernist lines within the French far right.

This article also demonstrated the way patriotic ecology contributes to a form of misinformation on the climate that is different from earlier forms of climate scepticism like denialism. Here, even though it was relatively secondary in their programme, both politicians acknowledged the existence of environmental issues and developed a coherent narrative that seems to superficially tackle it. However, using the model of Lamb *et al.* (2020), the analysis also illustrated that this far-right environmentalism primarily contributes to a wider discourse of climate delay, pushing non-transformative solutions, redirecting responsibility, discrediting more radical policies and overall defending the current status quo. What is most problematic however, and that is particularly the case in Le Pen's discourse, is that this gives the impression that these politicians treat the climate crisis seriously and thoroughly, even though the solutions they offer are insufficient at best and harmful at worst.

Beyond these specific cases of politicians and even the theme of patriotic ecology, what this article demonstrated was the plasticity of far-right actors that have managed to enter the political mainstream. From both of their personal journeys and professional careers, neither Le Pen nor Zemmour seemed well-equipped to tackle an issue like the environment that is so removed from their usual themes of predilection, and yet both of them managed to provide an overall cohesive narrative that integrated it within their wider programme. And all in all, regardless of who was more successful during that election, the presence in the public space of two politicians that shared a similar ideological platform but expressed their ideas differently illustrates a certain complementarity. Indeed, the diversity of expression of their patriotic ecology broadened the appeal of their narrative by reaching out to different audiences that might not have been receptive to the discourse of their rival. Of course, what is missing from this analysis is the wider political context, the reception from the audience, the influence on and of rival political figures as well as the mediatic resonance

of these discourses but examining this specific piece of the puzzle helps us understand the mainstreaming of far-right ideas through the lens of the versatility in the form that their discourse can take.

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