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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
United Kingdom		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
Spain		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
Italy		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
France		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
Germany		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
Hungary		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
Czech Republic		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
Poland		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

CHAPTER 5
FRANCE: GOVERNMENTAL UNPREPAREDNESS AS A DISCURSIVE OPPORTUNITY FOR POPULISTS

Abstract
This contribution offers a reminder of the state of political forces in France and the course of the health crisis, which initially took place in a context of strong political tensions, particularly as a result of the controversial pension reform decided by Macron. The COVID crisis allowed populist parties to develop 'naming' and 'blaming' strategies, initially mobilized in different proportions, to attack the President of the Republic Macron. The analysis shows that the decision to introduce a lockdown led the two leaders of the parties described as populist to harden their criticism to similar proportions but also to 'claim' rapid responses to the crisis. These speeches are also part of the medical polemics that will have been omnipresent throughout the pandemic. Finally, we observe that these strategies have not been beneficial to the populist parties, since during the municipal elections the two parties did not manage to take advantage on this health and political sequence.

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Introduction
The handling of the pandemic crisis in France followed the same road as in Italy, although one week later. The identification of the outbreak at the end of February 2020 was unexpected and COVID-19 was seen as a 'Chinese problem' that could not pose a problem for so well-prepared a health system as that in France. This was a mistake and the serious nature of the approaching emergency was for a long time understated as little more than '24-hour flu'. During the first months of 2020, meanwhile, French politics was focused on pension reforms (with massive demonstrations) and on the upcoming local elections (planned for 15 and 22 March). On the policy side, the French health system was not prepared for the shock (not enough face masks, respirators or emergency beds in hospitals) and government communication was erratic, asking people not to wear face-masks systematically and then saying the opposite a few days later. The political parties had to redefine their strategies and this chapter investigates the diverse roles played during the first four months of the emergency by the two most prominent populist parties, the National Rally (*Rassemblement national* – RN) and Indomitable France (*La France Insoumise* - LFI), whose strategies were hindered by the 'national unity' message. Both parties mixed different strategies, often based on evidence of the lack of medical equipment on the part of the French government.

1. Political context
France is often mentioned as an early breeding ground for populism. The RN (previously *Front National* - FN) is the 'prototypical populist radical right party' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 34) and the oldest institutionalised far-right party in Europe. The new left-populist LFI, meanwhile, was created during the 'new momentum to left-wing populism' in the wake of the euro crisis (ibid.: 37). Over the past decade, both parties have contributed to the general changes in the French party system, in which anti-elitism and media criticism have been used by all political competitors, from the 2007 presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy to the current French President Emmanuel Macron (Cole, 2019; Gougou & Persico, 2017).
Both played their part in the 'electoral earthquake' (Cole, 2019) of the last presidential elections, as four parties took 84.9% of the votes between them in the first round. Macron ended up with 24.01%, 2.7% ahead of Marine Le Pen on 21.3%. The difference between her second place and the fourth

position of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6%) was only 618 540 votes, out of a total of 31,381,603 French voters. Conservative François Fillon ended up in third position with 20.01%. Due to the electoral system in France, their results were not so good one month later at the general elections (see table 5.1). The RN/FN and LFI have not always had the same electoral success. After Jean-Marie Le Pen's qualification for the second round of the Presidential election in 2002 (16.9%), the party came in fourth in 2007 (10.4%), losing voters to Nicolas Sarkozy, and the decade that followed was not a successful one. However, since the 2012 Presidential election (17.9%, third position), the party has maintained its votes at a high level, coming first in the 2015 regional and 2019 European elections. Here lies the main difference with LFI, whose sole success (for the moment) was the latest Presidential election, before losing more than 5.6 million voters within two years, between 2017 and 2019.

The FN (now RN) has typical far-right roots in the anti-Semitic, anti-communist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative and/or fascist traditions, but has succeeded in moving 'from pariah to republican democratic contender' (Mondon, 2014). In 2011, in preparation for the 2012 elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen (83 years old) gave way to his second daughter Marine. With the help of young public relations staff and technocrats, she succeeded in framing her arrival as the sign of the party's 'normalisation' and 'respectability', despite being from the hard wing of the party. Following the same 'de-demonisation' approach, the party changed its name in 2018 and became the RN. Due to the peculiarities of the French electoral system, the party has few elected members: in 2019, 20 MEPs, 6 MPs, 1 Senator; and, since the end of June 2020, 10 mayors (but only 1 in a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants) and 5 additional mayors who are close to the party without officially representing it.

The story of Mélenchon and his party is very different, having starting on the left wing of the mainstream Socialist Party (PS). After the 2002 defeat against Le Pen, his view was that the party should become more leftist. After the second presidential defeat in 2007, he left the PS in 2008 along with other socialists to found a new left-wing party, inspired by the German example of Oscar Lafontaine's Die Linke in 2007. This small party made an alliance with the Communist Party and another small party to form the Left Front coalition, under the banner of which Mélenchon took part in the Presidential elections in 2012, and in the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections. After 2012, he radicalized his message with more provocative populist tones, inspired by Podemos, Syriza and Bernie Sanders (Castaño, 2018). In 2016, LFI was created as an eco-socialist movement, an electoral machine based on a horizontal hierarchy. It is a movement and not a party. In 2019, the party had 17 MPs, 2 Senators and 5 MEPs.

Table 5.1 Main French political parties (>5% in the last general election)

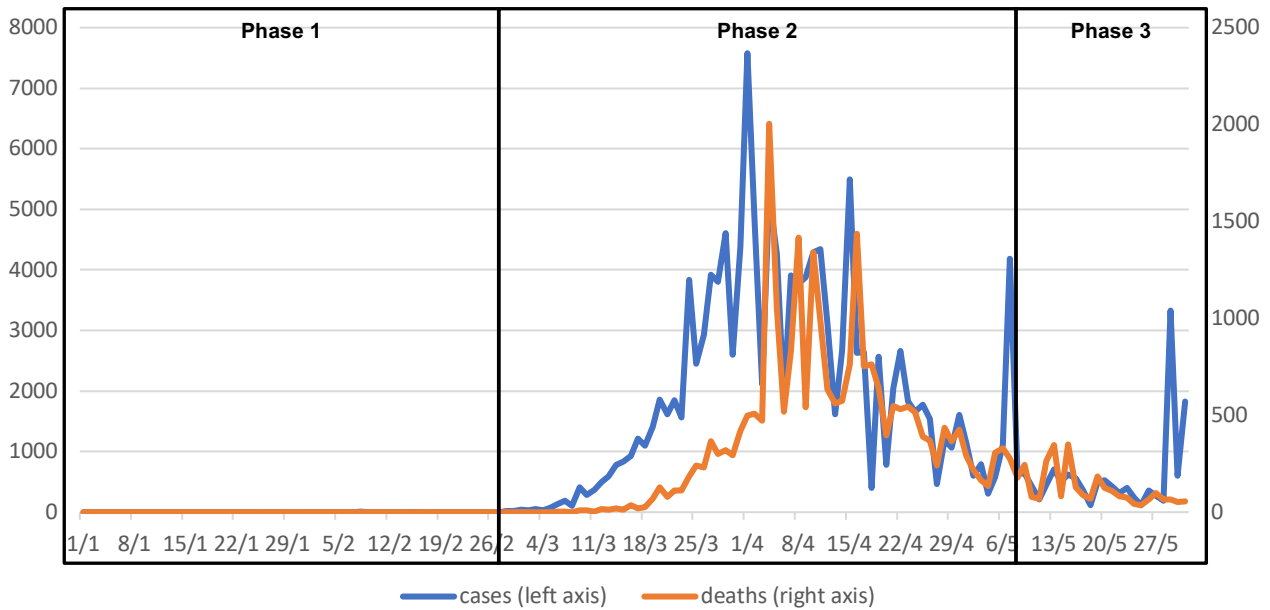| Political party	2017 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
In power				
La République en Marche (The Republic on the Move)	43.1	306	22.4	23
Modem	6.1	42		
Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	3	17		
In opposition				
La France Insoumise (Indomitable France)	4.9	17	6.3	6
Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party)	5.7	30	6.2	6
Les Verts (Greens)	0.1	1	13.5	13
Les Républicains (The Republicans)	22.	112	8.5	8
Rassemblement National (National Rally)/Front National	8.8	8	23.3	23

2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

During the *first phase* of COVID-19, the pandemic was framed as a foreign disease. After warnings from the World Health Organization and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, France did not take specific measures, although the country did have some very early cases. Five days after the first official deaths in China, a Chinese tourist in Paris was diagnosed on 16 January and died one month later. Eight days later, three French people returning from China were also diagnosed. On 30 January, a plane brought 200 French people back from Wuhan and they were placed in isolation. During this phase, the whole political sphere was focused on the upcoming local elections that were scheduled to take place on 15 and 22 March (and also on pensions reform). The Minister for Health even took the liberty of resigning on 16 February to stand in as her party's candidate for the upcoming municipal election for the Paris mayor's office, as the previous candidate was caught up in a sex-tape scandal.

The situation suddenly changed at the end of February with the first death of a French person (26 February). The government announced the *second phase* two days after, with bans on large groups meeting. The perception of the danger of the pandemic changed with the lockdown measures in Italy and the increasing number of infections and deaths. One week later, the government announced a 'reinforced step 2': closing of schools in two departments, requisitioning of the stock of face masks, fixing the price of disinfectant gels, and, more symbolically, the closing of the annual agricultural fair, always a political highlight and especially so just two weeks before elections. During that week, President Macron consulted the Presidents of the two Chambers of Parliament, those of the political groups and decided to go ahead with the elections, arguing that the scientific committee was not against it. On 12 March, Macron made the first of a series of TV addresses. The whole educational system (from kindergarten to university) was to be closed on 16 March, one day after the first round of elections. Two days later, Prime Minister Philippe announced that France had reached *phase 3* of the pandemic with a strict lockdown. The day after the elections, Macron gave his second TV address, justifying the closure of the borders, the restriction of public liberties, and preparing public opinion for a longer period of lockdown. In his third TV address (24 March), in a live broadcast from a field hospital, he presented the pandemic as a 'war' and launched a military operation to ease pressure on the overloaded hospitals in the East of France. Every day, a ministerial press-conference was broadcast live in the different media, giving the latest update on the pandemic situation. President Macron then stopped his TV addresses, appearing again only at the end of March in Angers to announce a new delivery of masks and (with the same warlike rhetoric) to launch a new 'national sovereignty' approach to health-policy. He appeared again on 13 April to announce the extension of the lockdown until 11 May. What would happen in *phase 3* was then explained one week later by the Prime Minister during a two-hour press-conference.

Phase 3 started slowly after 11 May: some regions remained half-closed, but schools could start to open some classes (but not all and not the universities), freedom of movement remained limited to a 100km radius, while access to bars and restaurants was also restricted. The second round of the local election was to be held on 28 June. President Macron then accelerated the transition on 14 June, announcing that schools must be open from 21 June until 5 July, when the summer vacations started. Most of the restriction measures were lifted, and the last restrictions on public liberties (mainly border controls) were removed on 9 July. The results of the local elections on 28 June were a disaster for Macron's party. Apart from the re-election of the Prime Minister in his own town, they did not succeed in winning any cities. In Paris, Macron's candidate came in third position.

Figure 5.1 Daily death toll and new cases in France

Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

Table 5.2 COVID-19 pandemic in France

Cases	154,591
Total deaths	29,296
Total recovered	71,506
Cases for 1 M pop	2,369
Deaths for 1 M pop	449

Source: www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ (update 10/6/2020)

3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19

The emergence of the pandemic in France transformed some aspects of the messages put across by the leaders of the RN and LFI. The COVID crisis came in the aftermath of a very dense period politically, characterized by weeks of demonstrations against the pension reform proposed by President Macron and by the campaign for the municipal elections held on the eve of the lockdown. The first few weeks of the year were therefore mainly devoted to pension reform, leading Mélenchon to publish Facebook posts such as '*Pension reform is only in the interest of the employers of financial companies. The productive employers of this country must say y a basta to the financial employers. Because it is the productive bosses who are paying for the financial bosses*' (30/01/2020) or Le Pen '*The government is setting France ablaze with a pension reform that is challenging a system to which the French were attached, and which will cost 5 to 10 times more than the deficit it was supposed to cover.... I demand a REFERENDUM!*' (14/01/2020). Each leader was thus true to the ideological line of their party and condemned the national elites, especially Macron. Le Pen focused on issues of insecurity and immigration ('*I am afraid that Emmanuel Macron is only interested in the issue of Islamist communitarianism for electoral reasons. In reality, unfortunately, he doesn't care about all this, he doesn't understand where the problem lies*', Le Pen's Facebook page 26/02/2020) while Mélenchon, for example, focused on the issue of fundamental rights and freedoms ('*Macron gives the police the right to censor websites*', Mélenchon's Facebook page, 23/01/2020). The classic dimensions of populism were at work here, with criticism of the elites (also journalists, referred to by Mélenchon as '*the media of the officialdom*'), defence of the people (for example by calling for a

referendum in the case of Le Pen or the Popular Initiative Referendum in the case of Mélenchon) and opposition to 'others' in the case of the president of the RN, mainly meaning migrants. Until the week before the lockdown, only five Facebook posts out of 404 were dedicated to the COVID-19 crisis. On France and China, Le Pen surprisingly posted on 29 January: '*Nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies our compatriots of Chinese origin being victims of mistrust because of the coronavirus. They have nothing to do with it after all! Let us remain intelligent and fraternal!*'. Interestingly, the pandemic was denounced as nothing more than a strategic pitch to force through pension reform (Le Pen's Facebook page, 29/02/2020).

The change came during the lockdown, as the period of elections and demonstrations was totally overshadowed by the COVID-19 crisis. The old themes were dropped on the whole, as the political news became entirely focused, for weeks on end, on the management and effects of this crisis. Pension reform was even postponed by the President of the Republic. However, the populist rhetoric was not abandoned, merely transposed to this new and unprecedented issue. The people were still held up as the absolute reference, as when Le Pen maintained that '*The people have the right to the TRUTH*' on the subject of mask policy or Mélenchon stated that decisions on health matters should be taken in such a way that '*the people are the only ones to ensure common salvation in complete independence*' (13 April 2020). Criticism of the elites also continued, sometimes in very vague terms for the president of the LFI ('*Ladies and gentlemen the powerful*', 13/04/2020) or more directly targeted against the government (as when Le Pen wrote: '*Three months of government LIES: I invite you to share this video massively!*', 7/04/2020). The main difference between the two, if we focus on the attributes of populism, was that Le Pen was the only one targeting social groups seen as not part of the people, even in times of health crisis. The President of the RN thus pitted French senior citizens against immigrants, claiming that the latter being given preference in the management of mask stocks, as she declared on 15 April that '*Masks for migrant centres and not for our retirement homes? Join me in denouncing this absolute SCANDAL!*'

The COVID-19 crisis did not fundamentally change the communication styles of the two leaders. Criticism of the elites (mainly the government and the presidency) remained strong, while references to the people did not weaken. This was partly due to the fact that the two leaders continued to be invited regularly by the media during the lockdown period. The crisis thus provided them with another opportunity to mobilize people in favour of (or against) more or less clearly identified groups: health care workers and the French, but also public services, as when Mélenchon declared that '*everywhere the epidemic will encounter health systems that are already largely under strain due to policies to reduce spending on public services*' (10/03/2020).

Hindered by the discourse of national unity that could make their criticism seem indecent, the two MPs used the most legitimate political tool at their disposal: their legislative activities in a time of semi-lockdown in parliament. Mélenchon asked the government two written questions and Le Pen five about the management of the pandemic. She also submitted three oral questions to the Government on this subject. However, it is interesting to note that in the National Assembly, both elected representatives linked this issue with their traditional ideological concerns. Le Pen thus linked COVID with immigration: '*Madam Secretary of State, Minister, my question is simple: on 10 August 1932, a law was passed to protect the national workforce during the Great Depression after the 1929 crisis; do you intend to present, in the same spirit, a text in order to abolish postings of workers from abroad, to establish national priority and thus respond to the social crisis resulting from the health crisis?*' (Facebook page, 18/05/2020). Mélenchon, meanwhile, focused on social matters by asking the government '*that an unconditional and equal bonus be announced for all health sector personnel. Furthermore, he [...] asks whether the salaries of these professionals, who have given so much, will be increased*' (Facebook page, 2/06/2020).

4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists

The COVID crisis was highly politicized by both parties. For both organizations, this politicization consisted in presenting the pandemic as a manifestation of the shortcomings of Macron's presidency. It is worth noting that the trilogy of 'naming, blaming, claiming' (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1981) was not followed through the phases of the crisis. Before phase 2, both populist leaders were silent and after that, they were permanently switching from one argument to another. However, as we have seen in the previous section, the two leaders handled this politicization in different ways.

Looking at their Facebook communication (until 31 May), Mélenchon was much more engaged in *naming* the problems than Le Pen (41.4% versus 30.2%), while the RN leader was *blaming* the government more frequently (37.1%) than her LFI opponent (18.9): 'Government lies and unpreparedness' (21/03/2020) was the motto of her communication during the whole period. Both used *claiming* in similar proportions, in one in every four posts (25.2% for Mélenchon and 24.1% for Le Pen). These strategies emerged spectacularly from week 12 onwards. At this point, when lockdown was becoming a reality for the French, the two leaders began an enterprise of politicizing and highlighting (*naming*, 14 posts) this issue and, at the same time, in similar proportions, *blaming* the government for its *unpreparedness* (9 posts) and *claiming* quick answers (8 posts), during this week. In comparison, two weeks earlier, in week 10, there was only one *naming* post and none using *blaming* or *claiming*, although the news was already partly focused on the spread of COVID 19. Everything was therefore happening as if the lockdown had acted like a match, setting fire to the debates, offering the two leaders a clear opportunity to take ownership of the subject, mainly by criticizing the government and the presidency. Weeks 13 to 16 were thus marked by a very intense period (but never as intense as in week 12) when the two leaders posted messages on Facebook based on *naming*, *blaming* and *claiming*.

The main arguments put forward by the two leaders with regard to *blaming* were based on the health management issues of the crisis. Mélenchon thus used both *naming* and *blaming* strategies when he wrote on 20 May 2020: '*Another Macron lie about masks: I had warned about this issue as early as the beginning of February... The French have the right to the TRUTH*'. He had also posted two days before: '*How can the President dare to say this when his government has LIED about the very usefulness of masks precisely to hide the shortage? These remarks are an unbearable provocation given the situation!*' (18/05/2020). The masks issue, as well as that of tests, was indeed the main topic at stake for the whole political sphere. Le Pen, who also condemned the Government's action on this issue ('*Today I was the guest of France 3 [a public media channel] to speak about easing the lockdown, the URGENT and IMPERATIVE supply of masks to the population and the shortcomings of the government and its bureaucracy in managing this crisis*', 19/04/2020), also used claiming strategies by writing: '*We voted in the Assembly for 5.5% VAT on masks. Why aren't we seeing this cut in prices in stores?! The same goes for sanitizer gel...*' (5/05/2020). However, the controversy was not only focused on health issues. Indeed, it revealed the difficulties being encountered by the French public hospitals system. The images broadcast on social networks of healthcare workers forced to protect themselves with garbage bags found an echo with the indignant leader of LFI: 'Caregivers are forced to use rubbish bags because they don't have gowns provided by the State. Unworthy of the world's 6th largest economy. We will not forget those responsible for such a disgrace to our public services. It is their policy that should be thrown away' (8/04/2020). Returning to his left-wing ideology, the health issue then also became an economic, budget, fiscal and ideological issue. '*What should be done about the debt?*' asked Mélenchon in the midst of this crisis.

More generally, this period was characterized by different public health controversies giving rise to blaming. Some were caused directly by the government: one week after the first round of the elections, previous Health Minister Agnès Buzyn acknowledged in an interview that, when she had resigned, she was '*crying because I was aware of the tsunami that was ahead of us...*'. Both leaders reacted directly, pointing to this mismanagement as an affair of State: '*If Agnes Buzyn's statements reflect the truth, this is a very serious scandal for the State. Ms. Buzyn will probably have to explain herself to the Court of Justice, perhaps the High Court will have to be seized...*' (Le Pen). In a long

message, Mélenchon described Agnes Buzyn's confession as '*appalling [...] Did she know and warn people three months in advance? And if so, why wasn't anything done? Why is she telling this story now when it's too late? Does she realize that she is criminally responsible for herself and for others, people she claims to have warned?*'. In the meantime, 90 legal proceedings have been initiated. The National Assembly and Senate have also opened parliamentary inquiries (respectively on 26 May and 30 June).

In the face of these critics, the government tried to depoliticize the situation. In an unprecedented move, Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, and Health Minister, Olivier Véran, organised a press conference on March 18 in the presence of three scientists: Professor Jérôme Salomon, Director General of Health, and Professors Karine Lacombe and Arnaud Fontanet. The tone was deliberately neutral, backed up by graphs and figures in order to depoliticize the political crisis that was beginning to emerge. Mélenchon acknowledged that '*the Prime Minister's information effort is necessary*', while describing the conference as '*less showy than the President's communication*' (Twitter account, 28/03/2020), but the controversies surrounding the masks and other lack of preparedness did not really cease. Macron's communication was accused of denying the facts (Mélenchon's Facebook page, 19/05/2020), as attested by the healthcare officers and the press: '*they're trying to be neither responsible nor guilty*!' (Le Pen's Facebook account, 5/05/2020).

These polemics are of course observed in the media as they are reflected in the official counting of media attendance of these parties in April 2020, in the midst of the pandemics[31]. On the two main TV channels, the presidential party and the executive have had the most air time (527 minutes), followed by the Republicans (144.19), LFI (70.16), the PS (69.03), the RN (54.03) and the Green Party (33.27). On the news channels, the populist parties are quite far behind the traditional parties. During the month of April, Le Pen was invited once on one of the main national radio station, Mélenchon on no occasion.

French public debate also focused on the chloroquine (HCQ) issue from the early days of phase 2, when epidemiologist Professor Didier Raoult announced on Youtube that his experiment would solve the problem. In true populist style, he denounced the pharmaceutical companies, criticized all his opponents and polarized the debate. During the peak of the crisis (22 March – 9 April), he was supported by the mainstream conservative opposition (Les Républicains) and Macron himself visited him in the first days of April. At the end of May, HCQ was forbidden to cure COVID-19. The two leaders also sought to be seen as close to the scientist. On 26 March, Mélenchon gave the broad outlines of a telephone conversation he had had with Professor Raoult, praising '*the calm, courtesy and smiling tone*' of the scientist and pointing out that '*Didier Raoult is too unpopular among the beautiful people not to arouse interest. Especially when it comes from friends of Madame Buzyn [former Minister of Health]. The woman who knew and lied*'. The scientific controversy therefore fuelled political controversy as well. Le Pen also sought to present herself as an advocate of Didier Raoult, speaking out on 22 March to laud '*The generalization of clinical trials for the chloroquine and azithromycin-based treatment of Professor Didier Raoult, announced by Health Minister Olivier Véran, is good news. FINALLY! Let's not close any option when facing the coronavirus!*'.

The entire crisis period was therefore subject to intense controversy and considerable politicization of health issues, from several angles: scientific, political, budget, moral, etc. The RN differentiated itself from Mélenchon by *claiming* a closure of all borders. Mélenchon, meanwhile, tried not to present only short-term policy answers. On 13 April, he presented LFI as an alternative for government: '*We can rule differently with other goals and methods. And we are willing to claim that we can start to do so at any time. That is why our contribution is a programme for government*', setting out different measures.

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[31] https://www.csa.fr/csapluralisme/tableau

5. Conclusion

The COVID crisis has not been without its political effects in France. The parties described as populist have both been heavily involved in this issue, focusing their criticism on the government and Macron himself. In particular, Le Pen made extensive use of the strategy of blaming political actors, while Mélenchon opted more for the strategy of naming these issues as broader political ones. After being an issue of secondary importance (coming after pension reform and the local elections), in both cases, the turning point came at the moment of the lockdown when the subject became unavoidable and monopolized the speeches of the two leaders.

This strategy does not seem to have really moved the lines, however, or gained popular support for either party. On the one hand, opinion polls show that voting intentions for the 2022 presidential elections have not moved:[32] Le Pen even lost one percentage point over the whole period, while Mélenchon and Macron remained stable. On the other hand, the municipal elections of June 2020 were a failure overall for all three parties (RN, LFI and LREM). The RN thus won only one municipality of more than 100,000 inhabitants (Perpignan) and now has only 840 council seats in 258 municipalities, against 1,438 seats in 463 municipalities in 2014, and lost some municipalities (one district of Marseille for example). For this election, LFI chose not to form an autonomous list and decided instead to participate in left-wing citizen's lists, but this 'choice did not work', according to Mélenchon. Macron's party was also severely defeated, only managing to win two cities of significant size: Le Havre (through Prime Minister Edouard Philippe) and Amiens (where Macron comes from). Ultimately, the health crisis and exhaustion of the French party system seems to have mainly benefited the traditional mainstream parties of government (LR and the PS, with the latter putting an end to its string of defeats by keeping control of Paris and Lille, for example) and the Ecologists, who managed to win by joining forces with other left-wing parties (PS) in large cities such as Marseille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Lyon, Grenoble or Montpellier. But these elections were also marked by a very high abstention rate (58% in the second round). Although the populist strategy did not work in this local election, the state of French democracy still seems fragile today, and while there is nothing to indicate that populist parties will take advantage of this in 2022, everything suggests that the French political game, after this health crisis, has become even more blurred.

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