Forecasting the 2022 French Presidential Election: From a Left–Right Logic to the Quadripolarization of Politics

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Most of the forecasting models used to predict French legislative and presidential election outcomes in the past 40 years have followed a Left–Right bipartisan logic (see, e.g., Foucault and Nadeau 2012; Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari 2012). In other words, the majority of models have been constructed to predict the division of the vote between the incumbent and the opposition or the Left and the Right. The bipolar nature of the French political system, however, has been challenged since the 1980s. Grunberg and Schweisguth (2003) argued that the Far Right became an ideologically distinctive and pervasive force in French politics, forming its own bloc following the 1995 presidential and 1997 legislative elections. Moreover, French politics now was organized around three poles (i.e., "tripartition"), each with a socially coherent and sizeable electorate. Since Emmanuel Macron's victory in the 2017 presidential election, the tripartition hypothesis has become difficult to defend for at least two reasons. First, the political center found a new and successful home in Macron's *En Marche!* party. Second, the Far Right candidate of the National Front (renamed the National Rally, or RN, in 2018) was able to reach the second round twice in the past two decades (i.e., 2002 and 2017), a clear indication of the party's entrenchment and influence (Marthaler 2020).

In light of these trends, it appears that French politics is in a process of "quadripolarization" among a fragmented Left, the Traditional Right, the Center, and the Far Right. This new playing field was complicated further by the entry into the 2022 campaign of political journalist Éric Zemmour, who was located at the intersection of the Traditional Right and the Far Right. Considering this complex reality, we devised a "multi-bloc popularity-economy model" based on the principle of seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR) to predict the vote share of five political families—the Left, the Traditional Right, the Center, the Far Right, and the Diverse Right—during the first round of the 2022 presidential election, as well as the outcome of the second round (Jérôme, Mongrain, and Nadeau 2022). The model forecasted the reelection of incumbent President Emmanuel Macron with slightly more than 53% of the popular vote in the second round against the Traditional Right candidate Valérie Pécresse (*Les Républicains*). This would have been the first time that a presidential ballot would host a confrontation between the Traditional Right and the Center since Gaullist candidate Georges Pompidou defeated Centrist Alain Poher in 1969.

THE MODEL

The division of the electorate into five large blocs that could obtain a respectable proportion of the vote in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election requires a methodological approach that allows the simultaneous prediction of multiple outcomes. We mobilized the SUR approach to estimate the vote share of the five blocs in the first round, which then were used to predict the vote share of the two qualified candidates in the second round. The SUR model was used because it considers the possibility that the determinants of voting for one candidate also may determine the vote for other candidates. Contrary to the ordinary least squares approach, the SUR model does not assume that the error term of an equation (i.e., roughly representing the relevant factors omitted from the analysis) is uncorrelated with the error term of the other equations—a highly improbable possibility when using election-results data (Mongrain 2021; Timm 2002; Tomz, Tucker, and Wittenberg 2002).[1]

Our SUR model of the presidential election was estimated for the 1965–2017 period (i.e., 10 presidential elections) and included five equations. The specifications for these equations were derived from what is referred to as "synthetic" models—first applied to the French forecasting case by Lewis-Beck and Dassonneville (2015)—because they combine both "structural" determinants of the vote (e.g., lagged measures of economic performance and incumbent popularity) and vote-intention data that serve as a catch-all indicator capturing mostly campaign-related events. The first two equations are described as "conventional" because they provide forecasts for the incumbent-party candidate (INC) and the "natural" opposition to the incumbent (OPP).[2] The third equation (CHAL) considers

the rivalry between the Traditional Right or Centrist incumbent and the "challenger." According to our hypotheses, the Republicans' candidate, representing the Traditional Right, would be Macron's challenger in 2022. Under the Fifth Republic, the Conservative or Centrist challenger has won

in January of the election year (OPPOLL). The opposition also will be favored by deteriorating economic conditions, which is measured by the change in unemployment (ΔU) between December $t{-}1$ and December $t{-}2$, where t is the election year. Under the Fifth Republic, the opposition also experienced an

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only twice against the incumbent: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing against Jacques Chaban-Delmas in 1974 and Jacques Chirac against Édouard Balladur in 1995. The fourth equation (FR) provides a forecast for the RN and the Far Right in line with the voting function created by Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari (2003). The fifth model (DR) is a simple equation

electoral boost from cohabitation periods (COHAB) in 1986–1988, 1993–1995, and 1997–2002. It also is noteworthy that Conservatives have never experienced an electoral boost by being in the opposition (CONSOPP).

Challengers (CHAL; see table 1, column 3) also will be judged prospectively using vote intentions in their favor

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estimating the vote share of the Diverse Right (*divers droite*), a constant in French politics that allowed us to estimate the electoral potential of Éric Zemmour.[3] To summarize, the first three models (i.e., INC, OPP, and CHAL) are based on contrasts between candidates and their "natural" or "traditional" opponents, whereas the fourth and fifth models (FR and DR) oppose "outsiders" (i.e., never-elected candidates) to all other candidates in a given election.

The incumbent's party model (INC; see table 1, column 1) is faithful to the government-accountability hypothesis (Key 1966) because it is founded on the assumption that voters look primarily at the incumbent's record. Therefore, a high level of unemployment (U6) should penalize the incumbent's party. Similarly, the higher the proportion of people who favorably evaluate the president's job—as measured by the average popularity of the incumbent president in the quarter before the election (INCPOP3)—the higher the vote share of the outgoing president's party should be.

The natural opposition (OPP; see table 1, column 2) to the incumbent is the Left when the Center or Conservatives are in power, the Center and Conservatives when the Left is in power (as in 2002 when the Socialist Party, or PS, and its allies held a majority in the National Assembly), and the Conservatives alone against the Left (the PS) in 2017. In the case of the opposition, because it has no record, voters must balance the expected gains (or costs) of keeping the incumbent in power against the potential costs (or benefits) of placing the opposition in charge. Consequently, this calculation should be partly forward looking. This prospective judgment can be approximated by using the vote intentions in favor of the opposition

(CHALPOLL). The question for voters is whether they will "do better" than the partners they supported. However, the more popular the incumbent, the more challengers should be penalized (INCPOP3). The challenger equation also includes two dummy variables. The first represents the electoral premium obtained by Macron (as the challenger) after François Hollande's decision not to seek a second term (DUMHOLL). The second variable marks the loss suffered by Centrist challenger François Bayrou with the disappearance of the Union for French Democracy (UDF) in favor of the creation of the MoDem in 2012 (MODEM).

The Far Right model (FAR; see table 1, column 4)[4] has a notable economic-vote feature. The higher the unemployment rate (U6), the better the RN should do at the polls and vice versa. RN voters also are sensitive to the personality of their candidate because they seek a "strong" leader (Chaillou 2016). The DUMMLP variable indicates the electoral premium of "personalization" experienced by Marine Le Pen following the 2012–2017 reorganization of the movement through the policy of *dédiabolisation* (loosely translated as "undemonization") adopted by the party. Furthermore, three dummy variables were added to the model. The first (DUMTIXIER) noted the candidacy of Far Right candidate Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancourt in 1965, which is not comparable to the *frontiste* candidacies. The second dummy variable (DUMLP81) noted the average loss suffered by the Far Right in the period following the inability of Jean-Marie Le Pen to participate in the 1981 election after failing to obtain the required number of signatures from local representatives to run for president (Dubois 2021). Finally, the third dummy variable (COHABRP) noted

Table 1
SUR Model for French Presidential Elections, 1965–2017

PARAMETERS	INC	OPP	CHAL	FAR	DR
Unemployment (U6)	−1.52***	–	–	1.95***	–
	(−4.06)			(22.77)	
Unemployment Change (ΔU)	–	7.26***	–	–	–
		(4.83)			
Incumbent Popularity (INCPOP)	0.49***	–	−0.19***	–	–
	(9.36)		(−7.26)		
Opposition Vote Intentions (OPPOLL)	–	0.64***	–	–	–
		(13.59)			
Challenger Vote Intentions (CHALPOLL)	–	–	0.24***	–	–
			(4.24)		
Diverse Right Vote Intentions (DRPOLL)	–	–	–	–	0.61***
					(6.36)
Cohabitation (COHAB)	−8.49***	2.75***	–	–	–
	(−3.84)	(2.86)			
Cohabitation Far Right Boost (COHABRP)	–	–	–	8.73***	–
				(19.09)	
Conservatives in Opposition (CONSOPP)	–	−8.22***	–	–	–
		(−6.27)			
Conservative Incumbent (DUMCONS)	–	–	–	–	3.68***
					(−5.55)
UDF–MoDem (MODEM)	–	–	–	–	–
			11.74***		
			(−8.37)		
RN/FN Undemonization (DUMMLP)	–	–	–	5.47***	–
				(10.24)	
Holland Resignation (DUMHOLL)	–	–	16.10***	–	–
			(8.76)		
Tixier–Vignancour (DUMTIXIER)	–	–	–	6.68***	–
				(19.09)	
Failed Le Pen Candidacy (DUMLP81)	–	–	–	–	–
				6.95***	
				(−16.01)	
Intercept	18.82***	17.29***	24.62***	–	4.02***
	(5.60)	(9.68)	(13.51)	4.24***	(6.39)
				(−6.75)	
Adj. R^2	0.86	0.93	0.95	0.97	0.81
Standard Error of Regressions	4.47	2.40	2.26	1.21	1.04
N	10	10	10	10	10

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients and t-stats (in parentheses) are reported. Significance levels: *$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two-tailed).

the electoral premium for Far Right candidates in periods of cohabitation between a right-wing president and a left-wing prime minister, as was the case in 2002.

The fifth model predicts the score of the Diverse Right (DR; see table 1, column 5),[5] which sometimes has undermined the ability of Conservative or Centrist candidates to unite in the first round. This notably was the case of Jean Royer in 1974,

Philippe de Villiers in 1995, and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan in 2017. Paradoxically, however, the Diverse Right candidacy also can be positive for right-wing incumbents in that it neutralizes votes that could have gone to the Far Right in the first round. The cost–benefit balance then must be considered. The main variable of the DR model is the vote intentions for the various right-wing candidates as measured by the polls in January of

the election year (DRPOLL). An additional dummy variable measures the electoral cost suffered by the Diverse Right when a Conservative is holding power (DUMCONS).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results for the SUR analysis.[6] From the estimated coefficients—all in the expected direction and statistically significant at the 0.01 level—we can proceed to the forecasting step. Data for the 2022 election were entered into the relevant equations. The raw results of the forecasts provided a total percentage of vote share for the candidates above 100%; consequently, the forecasts were normalized. According to the models' (normalized) forecasts,[7] the Left bloc (OPP) would obtain 31.6% of the popular vote; Macron (INC) 22.2%; Pécresse (CHAL) 18.6%; Le Pen (FAR) 15.0%; and the Diverse Right, including Zemmour, 12.6%. The left-wing bloc was in the lead but it included seven candidates: Philippe Poutou and Nathalie Arthaud of the Far Left, Fabien Roussel of the Communist Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of Unsubmissive France (*La France insoumise*), Anne Hidalgo of the PS, Arnaud Montebourg of the Diverse Left, and Ecologist Yannick Jadot. Therefore, we used the vote intentions for each of the Leftist parties to calculate their potential relative weight. Based on these calculations, the relative weight of the Communist Party and Unsubmissive France (combined) were 43.5%, the Ecologists 25.5%, the PS and the Diverse Left (combined) 23.1%, and the Far Left 7.8%. Thus, the estimates for the left-wing parties were 11.1% for the Communist Party and Unsubmissive France; 6.5% for the Ecologists/Greens; and 5.9% for the PS and the Diverse Left, which ended up in the final position. Therefore, according to our forecasts, the second round would oppose Macron to the right-wing candidate.

A priori, under stable economic and political conditions by April 2022 and given the margin of error of the equation for the incumbent candidate, Macron had a guaranteed place in the second round of the presidential election because he would gain between 18.25% and 26.15% of the popular vote.[8] Conversely, Le Pen (Far Right) could not reach the second round even if the RN reached its high range (i.e., 15.0+1.07=16.07%), and Pécresse on the Right reached her low range (i.e., 18.6–1.98=16.62%).

The question of the second round remains. To estimate second-round results, we first devised a first- to second-round

Table 2	
Second-Round Result of the Right-Wing Candidate, 1965–2012 (2002 Excluded)	
PARAMETERS	P2
(Center) Right First-Round Vote Share (RP1QUAL)	0.51***
	(7.25)
Competitor First-Round Vote Share (COMP1)	0.55***
	(4.48)
Far Right First-Round Vote Share (FAR1)	0.33***
	(3.73)
Diverse Right First-Round Vote Share (DR1)	0.82***
	(3.03)
Intercept	21.80***
	(5.52)
Adj. R^2	0.92
SER	1.13
N	8

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients and *t*-stats (in parentheses) are reported. Significance levels: *$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two-tailed).

share of the Diverse Right (DR1). Because we wanted, first and foremost, to analyze the transfer of votes to a right-wing candidate in the second round within the *lato sensu* right-wing camp, we excluded the 2002 and 2017 elections in which the Far Right candidate reached the second round. The model results are shown in table 2.

By introducing these predicted scores into the equation in table 2 (assuming that the right-wing candidate would not receive any electoral boost from the Centrist candidate he would face—in this case, Macron), we obtained a score of 46.8% of the vote for Pécresse, from which we deduced a score of 53.2% for the outgoing president. First- and second-round forecasts for the 2022 presidential election are summarized in figure 1. Macron then would have a comfortable lead. In fact, in a Macron–Pécresse matchup, Pécresse's victory chances appeared almost nil. However, this estimate was made at the beginning of December 2021. The eventual victory of the outgoing president depended on several conditions—namely, a similar popularity rating and an unchanged economic situ-

If Pécresse qualified for the second round against Macron, as indicated by our prediction, she therefore would need to propose a second-round program that could bring back the Center Right voters who switched from François Fillon to Macron between the first and second rounds in 2017.

vote-translation function by measuring the score achieved by the qualified candidate from the Right and Center Right in the second round (P2) based on the first-round score (RP1QUAL), the vote share of the competitor from the same camp (COMP1), the vote share of the Far Right (FR1), and the vote

ation until Election Day, as well as no vote loss from the Center to the Right during the second round.

On this last point, we could ask: All else being equal, could Pécresse win by taking a portion of the Centrist vote from the first round to the second round? Using the coefficients of the

Figure 1

First-Round and Second-Round Forecasts, 2022 French Presidential Election

(a) First round

(b) Second round
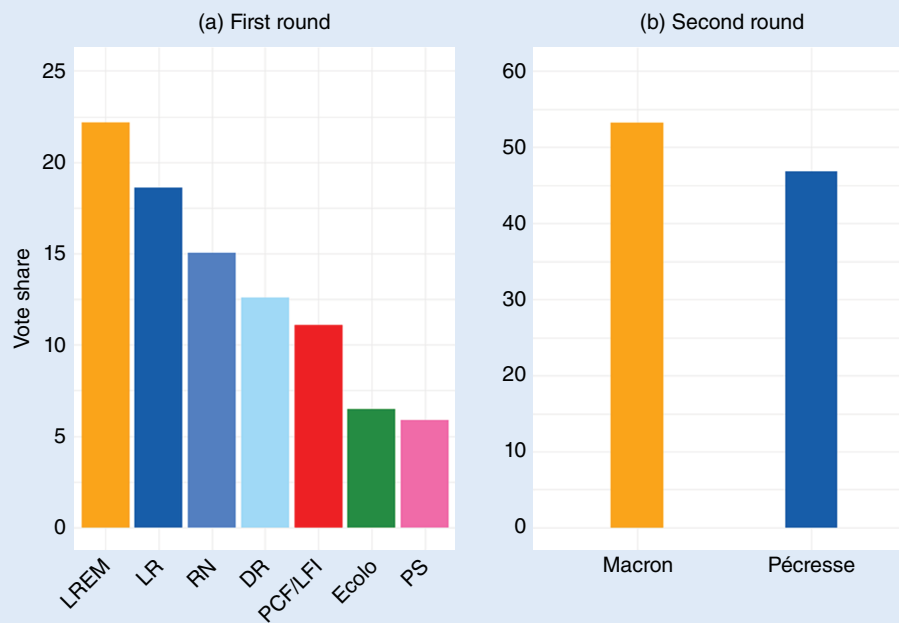
LREM=On the Move!, LR=The Republicans, RN=National Rally, DR=Diverse Right, PCF/LFI=Communists/Unsubmissive France, Ecolo=Greens, PS=Socialist Party.

previous equation, we estimated that if the right-wing candidate managed to capture 31% of the Centrist vote in the first round, she theoretically could beat Macron's opponent in the second round and win the presidency. In the entire history of the Fifth Republic, only Georges Pompidou (*Union des démocrates pour la République*) achieved such an outcome in 1969—even then, Pompidou succeeded in assembling "only" about 20% of the voters who supported Centrist candidate Alain Poher in the first round. Furthermore, Pompidou started from a considerable base of 44% of the vote in the first round. If Pécresse had qualified for the second round against Macron, as indicated by our prediction, she therefore would have needed to propose a second-round program that could have brought back the Center Right voters who switched from François Fillon to Macron between the first and second rounds in 2017.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VV1WM8.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000488.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ∎

NOTES

1. Further details on the SUR approach are in section D of the online appendix.
2. For data sources and a description of the dependent variables, see sections A and B, respectively, of the online appendix.
3. Labeling Zemmour as a Diverse Right candidate rather than a Far Right candidate seems appropriate given his political positioning and the profile of the voters that he tries to attract.
4. FAR is coded 0 when the Far Right had no candidates (i.e., 1969 and 1981).
5. DR is coded 0 when the Diverse Right had no candidates (i.e., 1965, 1969, and 1988).
6. Data are in the online supplementary materials.
7. The raw results were as follows: 35.8% for the Left bloc (OPP), 25.1% for Macron (INC), 21.2% for Pécresse (CHAL), 17.0% for Le Pen (FAR), and 14.3% for the Diverse Right (DR).
8. Adjusted standard error of regressions (SER) in accordance with normalized forecasts were used; see section C of the online appendix.

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