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Title: Mainstream party strategies towards extreme right parties: the French 2007 and 2012 presidential elections¹

Abstract

The electoral success of extreme-right parties (ERP) attracted a disproportionate number of studies on this topic. By contrast, research into the mainstream parties' approaches towards ERPs engendered sparse interest. With few exceptions, the effects of the centre-right parties' strategic options in the electoral competition with ERPs remain unexplored. To overcome this shortcoming, this investigation examines the strategies employed by the French centre-right party – *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) against the *Front National* in the 2007 and the 2012 presidential elections by focusing on the topics of immigration and integration. This study suggests that the adoption of accommodative approaches in both elections was followed by distinct levels of success in 2007 and 2012. Drawing from a qualitative comparative analysis, this article explores three hypotheses in order to enhance understanding of the divergent effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approaches in the selected ballots.

Keywords: centre-right parties, accommodative strategies, extreme right parties, immigration, Sarkozy

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Introduction

The extreme-right party (ERP) family (also labelled populist radical right) is considered the 'fastest-growing' party family in the post-war period. This upward trend is evident in the ERPs' participation in coalition governments in eleven countries in Western and Eastern Europe and in the granting of parliamentary support to minority governments in four European countries (Golder, 2016). Moreover, the *Front National* (FN) was the party with most votes in the French elections for the 2014 European Parliament. This electoral accomplishment was repeated in the first round of the 2015 regional elections (The Guardian, 2015). The Austrian 2016 presidential elections were marked by the victory of the far-right party - Freedom Party in the first round, later defeated, in the second round, with 49.7 per cent of the vote (The Guardian, 2016). The electoral success of ERPs attracted a disproportionate focus of scholars on the causes bolstering their upsurge, which turned this party family into the most studied in political science (Mudde, 2016).

By contrast, mainstream party strategies towards ERPs attract far less attention, which helps to explain the limited availability of in-depth research on this topic (Mudde, 2007; Bale et al., 2010). Yet, the electoral inroads of ERPs in European party systems pose complex challenges to mainstream parties, both on the left and on the right. Mainstream parties came under increasing pressure to devise strategies to tackle the ERPs' challenge at the ballots (Downs, 2001). In the mid-2000s, a seminal study was published on the relationship between electoral support of niche parties (including ERPs) and the strategies of mainstream parties (Meguid, 2008). Henceforth, a limited number of studies were developed on mainstream parties' strategies towards ERPs, exploring their impact on electoral competition at a cross-national level or the reasons underlying the adoption of particular strategic option (Bale et al., 2010; Odmalm and Bale, 2015; Wagner and Meyer, 2016). With very few exceptions (Odmalm and Hepburn, 2017), the causal factors that influence the effectiveness of the strategic options adopted by mainstream parties towards ERPs competitors remain unexplored in the literature.

Consequently, this topic remains engulfed in intense controversy, especially in cases where the centre-right parties converged with the policy positions of ERPs (Mudde, 2007). Some authors associated the rightward shifts of centre-right parties on immigration with the weakening of ERPs' electoral support (Kitschelt, 1995; Meguid, 2008). Others argued that accommodation strategies of mainstream parties towards ERPs enhance the latter parties' legitimacy and their political success (Bale, 2003; Mondon, 2014). In sum,

the research question formulated in the mid-2000s of ‘why and how co-optation works in some cases and not in others’ (Schain, 2006, p. 272) remains unaddressed, at present. To overcome this shortcoming, this article explores the effectiveness of the strategy adopted by the French centre-right party – the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP) towards the FN in the French 2007 and 2012 presidential elections by focusing on the topics of immigration and integration.

Past research into the French political system suggested that mainstream parties uncomfortably adopted the full range of available strategies towards the FN but failed to derail this party’s electoral inroads (Schain, 2006). Others associated the FN’s electoral entrenchment in the French party system with the successive failures of the French centre-right in conducting a successful accommodative strategy due to intraparty divisions, contradictory policy developments, and the centre-left’s adversarial approach (Meguid, 2008). Within this context, this investigation will explore the relationship between the UMP’s and the FN’s electoral performances in 2007 and 2012 and the strategic options undertaken by the French centre-right. Furthermore, the article will assess a set of hypothesis to understand the effectiveness of the UMP’s strategies towards the FN. To achieve these objectives, this investigation develops a comparative qualitative analysis of the two elections based on a most similar cases research design. This choice eliminates potential variations in the structural context that could influence the result of the French centre-right strategy towards the FN (George and Bennett, 2005).

The French presidential elections are contested on the basis of single member constituencies and according to a ‘two-ballot-majority-plurality’ electoral system, wherein the two most voted-for candidates from the first round pass onto the second round (Elgie, 2005; Grofman and Lewis-Beck, 2005). Based on poll analysis, the case selection enhances the evaluation of the UMP’s strategy towards the FN in the two rounds of the presidential elections. After the in-depth study of the two selected case studies, this investigation provides a comparative synthesis of the identified causal relationships to understand the divergent effectiveness of the centre-right party’s accommodative approaches. Thus, the subsequent investigation is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of the literature on mainstream parties’ strategies towards ERPs and the hypotheses evaluated in this investigation. The second and third sections explore the patterns of party competition in the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections, and the fourth part provides a comparative synthesis. The final section highlights the contribution

of this investigation to the wider literature on political competition between the centre right and ERPs.

Strategic options of mainstream parties towards ERPs

Drawing from the seminal investigation proposed by Meguid (2008), mainstream parties compete with niche parties through their ability to shift policy positions, to manipulate the overall salience in the political agenda, and to contest the issue ownership of the emerging party. Following this 'spatial model of party interaction', the established parties' strategies encompass: dismissive strategies, adversarial strategies, and accommodation approaches (Meguid, 2008; see also Downs, 2001, and Bale et al., 2010). A dismissive strategy involves the deliberate negligence of the most important issue articulated by the niche party in order to reduce the salience of their political agenda. Therefore, mainstream political elites seek to diminish the niche party's legitimacy and to enhance its political ostracism (Meguid, 2008). Alternatively, an adversarial approach refers to cases in which the mainstream parties adopt the opposite stance on the policy issue introduced by the niche party. Despite the emphasis on the illegitimate character of the niche parties' proposals, this strategic option ends up reinforcing the salience of their political agenda and these parties' issue ownership (Meguid, 2008).

Accommodation strategies involve a convergence by the mainstream parties with the policy position articulated by the niche party. This political process has also been labelled engagement, informal co-option, or clothes stealing in other studies on ERPs (Downs, 2001; Schain, 2006; Hainsworth, 2008). Through this strategy, mainstream parties acknowledge the importance of the topic dominated by the niche party, increasing its overall salience, and adopting a similar policy stance to the one proposed by the new rival. The success of an accommodative approach is supposedly interdependent with a particular timeframe: the early stage of the main issue's politicisation (Meguid, 2008). Once an ERP becomes entrenched in the party system, the chances of mainstream parties' efforts to undermine the niche's party issue ownership decline substantially (Art, 2006). There is a wide expectation that accommodative approaches will most likely help overturn the new party's exclusivity on a particular topic, undermine its issue ownership, and foster the niche party's electoral decline (Kitschelt, 1995; Meguid, 2008).

However, recent cross-national research concluded that 'broad based mainstream accommodation' was not followed by a decline in ERPs' electoral support. This study

recommended the reassessment of the relationship between mainstream party strategies and the radical right's performance in the polls (Wagner and Meyer, 2016). Furthermore, the deployment of accommodation strategies also involves potential perils as the rightward shift of the centre-right can alienate median voters, directly benefiting rival mainstream parties (Kitschelt, 1995). In this context, this research will identify the strategies employed by the UMP towards the FN for the selected ballots and explore the effectiveness of those strategic choices. This assessment demands the analysis of the issue ownership of opposition to immigration, the rates of electoral support of the UMP and the FN in the first round, and the behaviour of the ERP's electorate in the second round of the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections.

Drawing from insights based on the literature on mainstream parties and ERPs, this article examines three hypotheses to enhance understanding of the effectiveness of the UMP's strategy towards the FN in 2007 and 2012. First, mainstream party strategies are supposedly bolstered by the greater legislative experience and governmental efficacy of the mainstream parties. These parties also enjoy extensive access to the media and a wider ability to disseminate their policy preferences across the electorate than niche parties do (Meguid, 2008). Hence, the higher degree of party resources and access to the media enjoyed by mainstream parties is supposed to explain the vulnerability of ERPs in the face of the mainstream parties' strategies.

H1 – centre-right parties' greater access to electoral resources than ERPs fosters the success of the centre-right parties' accommodative approaches towards ERPs

Secondly, the lack of effectiveness of mainstream parties' accommodative or adversarial strategies towards ERPs was associated with endogenous factors related with the observation of intra-party conflicts. Internal divisions can severely affect the credibility of the mainstream party's selected strategy, delay its implementation, or even prevent the adoption of the ideal strategic option (Meguid, 2008, p.92). The second hypothesis will therefore explore the potential impact of intra-party disputes on the effectiveness of the UMP's strategy towards the FN in 2007 and 2012.

H2 - a lack of internal divisions within centre-right parties boosts the success of their accommodative approaches towards ERPs

In the context of diminishing party membership and the decline of partisan loyalties across Europe, political competition became increasingly centred on the personality of

party candidates (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Past research suggested that public preferences at the electoral level became ever more contingent upon perception of the candidates' personal traits and their ability to implement the proposed electoral pledges (Mayer, 2007, Carvalho, 2014). Therefore, the influence of the UMP's and the FN's candidates' public images over the efficiency of the French centre right strategic options at the selected ballots is the third hypothesis examined in this research.

H3 - the electorate's superior appraisal of the centre-right candidate's personal qualities in comparison to those of the extreme-right candidate enhances the success of centre-right parties' accommodative approaches towards ERPs.

The comparison of the relationships between the former hypotheses and the effectiveness of the UMP's strategies in the two selected cases will enhance the identification of the most relevant causal factor behind the former political process. After this theoretical overview, the next section presents an in-depth analysis of the 2007 presidential elections.

[The French 2007 presidential elections](#)

From the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, the French centre-right's electoral strategy was closely associated with the personality of Nicolas Sarkozy (Haegel, 2013). Nominated as the UMP presidential candidate in January 2007, Sarkozy's political campaign had been active ever since his ascension to the UMP's presidency in 2004. Thereafter, Sarkozy employed this office as a platform for unveiling his electoral strategy for the 2007 presidential elections and adopted a two-pronged approach on immigration and integration (Marthaler, 2007). To secure the UMP's nomination for the presidential election, Sarkozy sought to distance himself from the UMP President Jacques Chirac's unpopular legacy. The French interior minister adopted a confrontational approach towards Chirac, presenting controversial proposals like the deployment of a quota-system to manage inflows and positive discrimination regarding the integration of immigrants (Sarkozy, 2005). These measures embodied Sarkozy's overall project to promote a 'rupture' with past approaches, but President Chirac vetoed them due to their challenge to French Republicanism (Schain, 2008). Consequently, this intra-party conflict fostered the interior minister's image as an outsider vis-à-vis the political establishment, someone who would break with the status quo, and insulated Sarkozy from the UMP's negative incumbency effect (Cole et al., 2008).

Parallel to this, Sarkozy's proposals regarding immigration control sought to neutralise the FN's threat of dividing the right-wing electorate in the first round of the 2007 election (Carvalho, 2014). At a party convention entitled: 'selected immigration, ensured integration', Sarkozy (2005) announced the objective of increasing the share of labour immigration to the detriment of 'unwanted inflows' (family reunion and asylum). Notwithstanding Sarkozy's rejection of 'zero-immigration policies', the framing of particular types of inflows as unwanted was distinctive of the FN's electoral programmes (FN, 2001). Thereby, the UMP positions on immigration control shifted into the FN's grounds in order to mobilise the far right's electorate in Sarkozy's favour in 2007, as he himself admitted in public (Marthaler, 2007). Despite the watering-down effects of the Presidential veto, the 2006 immigration law introduced substantial restrictions on family reunion as well as a Welcome and Reception Contract to tackle a 'crisis of the integration system' (Schain, 2008). Consequently, Sarkozy's tenures as Interior Minister (2002-2003, 2005-2007) enhanced public perception of his statesman credentials and governmental efficiency regarding the promotion of a restrictive approach to immigration (Cautrès and Cole, 2008).

During the 2007 electoral campaign, the convergence between the UMP's stances on immigration and integration and the FN's discourse was evident, following Sarkozy's informal co-option of the FN's cultural xenophobia. According to the UMP candidate, France faced 'the most serious identity crisis in its history', which was associated with irregular inflows and the presence of immigrants unwilling to integrate into French society (Sarkozy, 2007). The framing of immigration as a threat to national identity was a cornerstone of the FN's ideology under the leadership of Jean Marie Le Pen and in the FN's electoral campaign in the preceding presidential elections (FN, 2001). Thus, the UMP adopted an accommodative approach towards the FN's stances. The radicalisation of the UMP's positions on immigration and integration was crystallised by Sarkozy's proposed creation of a ministry of immigration and national identity in a TV interview (*Libération*, 2007). Furthermore, the UMP manifesto restated the proposal of a quota system to manage inflows and the introduction of further restrictions on family reunion (UMP, 2007).

In opposition to the UMP's rightward shift, the FN watered down the party's cultural xenophobia, under the influence of Le Pen's daughter – Marine Le Pen. The FN's leader campaigned against globalisation, expansion of communitarianism, and uncontrolled

immigration (FN, 2007). Sarkozy's proposal for a selective immigration policy was opposed, with the defence of zero-immigration policies alongside the deployment of national preference programmes regarding access to the labour market that would favour national citizens (Carvalho, 2014). At the same time, the centre-left candidate of the *Parti Socialiste* – Segolène Royal failed to deploy an adversarial strategy towards the UMP's shift into far-right grounds. Whereas Sarkozy proposed the creation of the ministry of national identity, Royal emphasised the importance of the tricolour flag and the national anthem (Kuhn, 2007). This statement reduced the ideological gap between the mainstream parties' stances on immigration and integration and was considered inappropriate for a centre-left candidate (Bell and Criddle, 2008).

The UMP's accommodation strategy towards the FN and the emphasis on immigration and integration throughout the electoral campaign resonated with an important segment of the electorate. According to polls, immigration was ranked as the sixth most important issue by 7.1 per cent of respondents (PEF, 2007). The FN candidate was still rated as the best candidate for dealing with this issue by 40.9 per cent of the voters who ranked immigration as their top priority. Nonetheless, Le Pen was closely followed by the UMP candidate, who collected 32.2 per cent of similar responses from those same voters (PEF, 2007). Therefore, Sarkozy effectively disputed Le Pen's issue ownership of opposition to immigration, despite the FN's long-term entrenchment in the French party system. The French 2007 presidential elections suggest that mainstream parties can effectively contest ERPs' issue ownership in later stages of the politicisation of immigration.

The UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN was successful in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections, after Sarkozy collected 31 per cent of the vote with the support of more than 11 million French citizens, whilst Le Pen obtained a mere 10.4 per cent (representing 3,834,530 votes; Bell and Criddle, 2008). Le Pen's 2007 result represented the FN's worst electoral performance in a presidential election since 1974 and a substantial decline compared to the electoral peak of 16.9 per cent of the vote obtained in 2002 (Carvalho, 2014). The FN's electoral contraction benefited the centre-right candidate, with polls indicating that 26 per cent of Le Pen's 2002 voters transferred their electoral support to Sarkozy (Mayer, 2007). In the second round, Sarkozy's electoral share was strengthened by the overwhelming support of 69 per cent of Le Pen's voters from the first round, which indicated the acute intensity of the centre right's seizure of the FN's electorate (Perrineau, 2008). Consequently, the 2007 presidential elections

suggest that ERPs' immunity to the counter-strategies of centre-right parties is not a permanent political feature and can be severely disturbed in particular circumstances.

The extraordinary effectiveness of the UMP's strategy towards the FN regarding the issue ownership of opposition to immigration and the electoral behaviour observed at both the first and second rounds of the 2007 presidential elections were positively related with the higher level of party resources enjoyed by the centre-right party in comparison to the selected ERP. According to a media survey, the UMP candidate was the beneficiary of more than 390 minutes of coverage in TV news programs before the first round, whilst the FN candidate only accrued slightly more than 150 minutes (Gerstlè and Piar, 2008, p. 36).² Secondly, the intra-party disputes over immigration and integration within the UMP were also positively related with the success of Sarkozy's accommodative approach towards the FN. The disagreements between President Chirac and the former Interior Minister reinforced the latter's image as an outsider vis-à-vis the political elite. This detachment was important for the mobilisation of voters disgruntled with mainstream politics and those frustrated with past approaches to particular topics like immigration and integration (Cautrès and Cole, 2008).

Contrary to expectations, the intra-party disputes on immigration and integration failed to undermine the UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN as predicted in the literature, having effectively bolstered the efficiency of this strategic option in 2007. Lastly, the success of the UMP's strategic option was also positively related with the distinct appraisal of Sarkozy's and Le Pen's personal traits among the electorate. The UMP candidate was associated with the qualities of a President by almost two thirds of respondents, while Le Pen failed to obtain one fifth of favourable ratings (Figure 1). Similarly, the public polls suggested that the French electorate rated Sarkozy's 'willingness to change things' and his 'understanding of people like us' on a much higher level than Le Pen (Figure 1). Consequently, Sarkozy benefited from a positive incumbency effect from his tenures as interior minister that strengthened public perception of his statesman qualities. The intraparty divisions on immigration and integration boosted Sarkozy's project to promote a 'rupture' with past policy and his image as an outsider.

² The media survey was conducted between the 18th of September 2006 and the 21st of April of 2007 on the basis of analysis of TV news programs broadcast during dinnertime (20 hours) by channels TF1 and France 2 (Gerstlè and Piar, 2007, p. 36).

Insert Figure 1 near here

By contrast, the FN's candidate held a deep credibility deficit among public opinion that reflected Le Pen's pyrrhic victory in the 2002 presidential elections and his political strategy of privileging controversy over policy feasibility (Mayer, 2007). Whereas Sarkozy contested his first presidential election and represented a generational shift in domestic politics, the ageing Le Pen (who was 78 years old, at the time) had been the FN's presidential candidate since the mid-1970s and had expended an important share of his political capital (Carvalho, 2014). In short, the success of the UMP's accommodative strategy towards the FN in 2007 was positively related with the three proposed hypotheses regarding: the higher levels of resources of the UMP, the centre-right divisions over immigration and integration, and Sarkozy's higher levels of political capital in the face of a discredited FN candidate. The next section explores the effectiveness of the UMP's strategy towards the FN in the 2012 presidential elections.

[The 2012 presidential election](#)

The French 2012 presidential election took place against a backdrop of economic decline, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and President Sarkozy's deep unpopularity among the electorate. This trend reflected President Sarkozy's 'bling-bling' posture, compounded by personal excesses and public blunders during the first half of his term. The electoral honeymoon was shortened by events like the post-victory celebration in a luxurious restaurant, short-term extravagant holidays offered by business allies, or the exposition of the President's private life. These episodes fostered public distrust and the perception of Sarkozy's unsuitability to perform according to the Gaullist Presidential style (Cole et al., 2013). Simultaneously, two policy U-turns from the cornerstones of the 2007 electoral campaign were observed. Three years after its creation, President Sarkozy abolished the controversial ministry of immigration and national identity and dropped references to national identity in order to prevent further public misunderstandings (Le Figaro, 2010). The paradigm of a selective immigration policy was replaced, in 2011, by the reduction of regular immigration, due to the failure to increase the share of labour inflows to half of the annual entries (Carvalho, 2016).

Moreover, President Sarkozy's direct interventions on immigration and integration fostered intense intra-party divisions and political censure at the external level, which hindered the implementation of the policy inputs. After deadly clashes in Saint Agnain in 2010, President Sarkozy ordered the removal of illegal Roma camps and the forced removal of EU citizens of Roma origin living in them. However, intense endogenous and exogenous opposition involving the UMP cabinet and the European Parliament derailed the enactment of this measure. Intense intraparty conflicts resurfaced, in 2011, over the Interior Ministry's decision to deprive foreign students of temporary residence authorisations upon completion of their studies. The opposition within the UMP, led by the Education Minister - Valérie Pécresse and former Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin, forced President Sarkozy to water-down the UMP government's restrictive approach to student immigration (Carvalho, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the 2012 electoral campaign was distinctive for the lack of references to President Sarkozy's incumbency record or to national identity.

To divert attention from his record in office, Sarkozy announced a series of referendums, including a proposal to facilitate the forced removal of irregular immigrants, despite his past opposition to plebiscites (Piar, 2013; Le Monde, 2012a). The UMP's position on immigration and integration was clearly located into FN territory after President Sarkozy stated in a TV interview that: 'there are too many foreigners in France'. Therefore, the UMP candidate pledged to halve the intensity of annual inflows and to reduce foreign citizens' access to welfare benefits (Le Monde, 2012b). At a political rally with party supporters, Sarkozy framed irregular immigration as a peril to European civilisation and threatened to pull France out of the Schengen agreement if borders controls at the European level were not expanded (Sarkozy, 2012a). These pledges were restated in the UMP 2012 party manifesto, which led a liberal American newspaper to label the centre-right candidate as 'Nicolas Le Pen' (UMP, 2012; The Wall Street Journal, 2012).

The UMP, thus, adopted an anti-immigration stance very close to the FN's stances, which suggested the repetition, if not the escalation, of the accommodative approach employed in 2007 (Hewlett, 2012). Nonetheless, the UMP faced a new and younger far-right challenger, after the ascension of Marine Le Pen to the FN's leadership in 2011. Following a strategy of de-demonising the FN, Marine completely dropped references to national identity in favour of Islamophobia and the intensification of the FN's opposition to the European Union and globalisation (FN, 2012). Unlike her father, Marine cultivated

a serious political style involving consistent proposals to strengthen France and its role in world politics (Fourquet and Gariazzo, 2013). Parallel to this, the PS candidate – François Hollande sought to capitalise on the incumbent President's unpopularity and turned the presidential ballot into an anti-Sarkozy referendum (Cole et al., 2013). On immigration, Hollande closed ranks with the UMP by adopting a restrictive approach towards irregular immigration, coupled with the acceptance of regular immigration and student inflows (Hollande, 2012).

After qualifying in second place for the second round of the Presidential election, the UMP candidate's potential victory over the PS candidate turned increasingly dependent on Marine's supporters (Kuhn and Murray, 2013). Consequently, Sarkozy intensified the accommodative strategy towards the FN in the electoral campaign between rounds (Chiche and Dupoirier, 2013). According to the incumbent President, the FN under Marine's leadership conformed to the standards of a 'democratic party' whose proposals followed the Republican paradigm, which signalled the first time the FN was accepted as a normal contender by a French President (Mondon, 2014). Furthermore, President Sarkozy expressed his support for the establishment of national preference programmes, in a reference to the FN's welfare xenophobia (Sarkozy, 2012b). Thereby, the UMP candidate continuously radicalised the centre right's stances on immigration and integration.

Despite the UMP's overwhelming emphasis on immigration and integration throughout the electoral campaign, this strategic option failed to resonate with the general electorate (Cole et al., 2013). In the context of intense public concern with economic issues, the salience of immigration declined, with this topic being ranked as the most important issue by a mere 2.2 per cent of respondents to a post-electoral poll (PEF, 2012). This public poll indicated the FN's recovery of its hegemony among the diminished segment of voters most concerned with immigration. Marine was ranked as the best candidate to deal with immigration by 67.7 per cent of the voters most concerned with this topic, whilst Sarkozy secured only 19.4 per cent of similar opinions (PEF, 2012). The large gap between the rankings of the two right-wing candidates indicates that President Sarkozy's rightwards shift failed to challenge the FN's issue ownership of opposition to immigration in 2012.

The UMP's accommodative strategy towards the FN also failed at the polls, as President Sarkozy garnered 27.18 per cent of the vote (representing the support of 9,753,629 French citizens) in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, trailing behind the centre-

left candidate. The incumbent President lost the support of 1,7 million voters and only managed to secure half of his 2007 electorate (Chiche and Dupoirier, 2013). By contrast, Marine obtained a strong third place, with 17.9 per cent of the vote, amassing 6,421,426 votes, which represented the FN's best electoral performance ever in a presidential ballot (Perrineau, 2013). According to electoral polls, the UMP strategy in-between rounds successfully increased the support for the incumbent President among Marine's first round voters (Fourquet and Gariazzo, 2013). Yet, the UMP's political convergence with the FN may have also alienated the potential support of centrist voters, as suggested by a public poll conducted before the first round (Piar, 2013).³

Notwithstanding the upward trajectory in-between rounds, President Sarkozy was unable to repeat the broad success observed in the 2007 elections. In the second ballot, the UMP candidate, having obtained 48.36 per cent of the vote, was defeated by Hollande, who garnered 51.67 per cent of the vote. Post electoral surveys indicated that the UMP candidate benefited from the vote transfer of 57 per cent of Marine's first-round voters but was unable to prevent the centre-left candidate from obtaining the support of 17 per cent of those voters (Perrineau, 2013). Effectively, Hollande's support among over one million of Marine's first-round voters who were disgruntled with the incumbent President was deemed crucial to sustain the centre-left's victory in the second round. President Sarkozy's ability to capture a substantial share of Marine's voters in the second round helped reduce the magnitude of his defeat, but was unable to propel him to an overall victory that would have led to a second term (Chiche and Dupoirier, 2013).

The repetition of the UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN in 2012 failed to tackle the FN's ownership of opposition to immigration, prevent Marine's remarkable result in the first round, or to prevent the defection of 1 million FN first-round voters to the centre-left candidate in the second round. Considering the FN's rate of success in 2012, President Sarkozy's management of immigration and integration during his term and the political convergence in the electoral campaign seem to have enhanced Marine's electoral expansion among the French electorate (Mondon, 2014). In the longer term, the convergence between the UMP's and the FN's stances on these topics fostered the ideological radicalisation of the centre-right electorate. This process helps explain the emergence of two rival camps within the UMP, as was evident in the 2013 internal ballot

³ In February 2012, the values and topics of Sarkozy's campaign were considered too divisive by 59 per cent of the respondents to a public poll (Piar, 2013).

for the party's leadership (Haegel, 2013). Another long-term consequence consists of the erosion of the boundaries between the centre-right and the ERP electorates, especially on the topics of immigration and security (Fourquet and Gariazzo, 2013). This trend fosters the potential observation of electoral swings among the right-wing electorate between the UMP and the FN in the future.

The diminished effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN in 2012 diverged from the centre-right party's more extensive resources compared to the French ERP. Furthermore, Sarkozy benefited from holding the Presidential office, which provided additional electoral resources, direct agenda setting powers over the legislative agenda, and broad access to the media. Media polls indicate that President Sarkozy obtained more than 3 hours and 43 minutes of TV coverage, as opposed to the 1 hour and 45 minutes accrued by Marine (CSA, 2013, p. 125).⁴ Thus, the vast electoral resources at the UMP's disposal contrasted with the ineffectiveness of the centre-right's accommodative strategy in 2012. Secondly, the intense intra-party divisions over immigration and integration help explain the successive policy setbacks observed during President Sarkozy's term (Carvalho, 2016). This trend diminished the UMP candidate's credibility among the electorate and weakened public perception of his ability to promote a rupture with past approaches. Therefore, the intra-party conflicts over immigration and integration during President Sarkozy's term undermined the UMP's strategy towards the FN at the 2012 elections.

Public polls conducted during the 2012 electoral campaign indicate that President Sarkozy's unpopularity contained direct repercussions on his public image (Chiche and Dupoirier, 2013). By contrast, Marine's public evaluation excelled in comparison to her father's rankings in 2007 (Figure 1). The UMP candidate was still perceived by the public as possessing more statesman-like qualities than the FN candidate (Figure 1). However, President Sarkozy's willingness to change things and his understanding of the problems faced by common people were ranked lower than the FN candidate's by the respondents to the public poll (Figure 1). Hence, the public perception of the UMP candidate's ability to promote a rupture with past policy slumped after the presidential term in the face of a young and inexperienced FN candidate. The lower appraisal of President Sarkozy's personal qualities in the face of a fairly popular FN candidate was thus positively related

⁴ Media survey was conducted between the 1st of January and 19th of March of 2012 on the basis of TV news and programs broadcasted by channel TF1 (CSA, 2013, p. 125)

with the diminished effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN in 2012. The next section compares the trends identified at the two selected first-order-ballots.

Comparative synthesis

This investigation suggests that the French centre-right party adopted accommodative approaches towards the FN in both the 2007 and the 2012 presidential elections. While this strategic option was embodied by Sarkozy's informal co-option of Le Pen's cultural xenophobia in 2007, the deployment of a similar strategy in 2012 involved the UMP's convergence towards the anti-immigration stances proposed by the FN under Marine's leadership. An important level of variation was identified in the contents of the UMP's accommodative approaches, which suggest that the configuration of this strategic option evolves over time rather than being static. The FN's issue ownership of opposition to immigration was effectively contested by the UMP candidate in 2007, whilst the French ERP's hegemony regarding this topic was fully recovered by 2012. Therefore, ERPs' hegemony concerning opposition to immigration is not inevitable and can be disrupted by mainstream parties despite the former's long term entrenchment in the party system. However, public polls suggest that the French centre-right accommodative approach towards the FN on immigration and integration resonated with a salient segment of the electorate in 2007 whereas it only appealed to an electoral fringe in 2012.

Similarly, the UMP's accommodative approach towards the FN entailed the capture of a substantial share of Le Pen's 2002 electorate in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections. Nonetheless, the insistence on this strategic option in 2012 was followed by the FN's best performance ever in a presidential ballot. Like the trend observed regarding the issue ownership of opposition to immigration, the effectiveness of UMP's accommodative strategy was much weaker in the first round of the 2012 ballot than in 2007. Regarding the electoral behaviour in the second rounds, the UMP's candidate collected the support of 69 per cent of Le Pen's first-round voters in 2007 but only 57 per cent of Marine's supporters in 2012. The vote swings among right-wing voters in 2012 were significant but insufficient for President Sarkozy to obtain a second term, especially after the UMP's strategy failed to prevent an important share of the FN's first-round electorate from transferring their support to the centre-left candidate. These trends suggest that the UMP's accommodative approaches towards the FN were successful in 2007 but

much less effective in 2012. Thus, the electoral effects of centre-right parties' accommodative approaches towards ERPs should be interpreted as a contingent outcome rather than as an unavoidable success.

The comparative analysis of the relationship between the proposed explanatory factors and the effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approaches highlights the importance of public perception of the right-wing candidates' personal qualities. By contrast, the UMP's higher level of party resources, compared to that of the FN, held a weak relationship with the effectiveness of the French centre right's accommodative approaches. Whereas a positive relationship was observed in 2007, the diminished effectiveness of the UMP's strategy towards the FN in 2012 diverged from the party's increased advantage in terms of electoral resources in that election. Secondly, the intra-party conflicts within the UMP over immigration and integration contained distinct effects over the effectiveness of the centre right's accommodative approaches towards the FN. The intra-party disputes observed during President Chirac's term enhanced the UMP's accommodative strategy in 2007 because they boosted Sarkozy's image as an outsider vis-à-vis the political establishment. Similar disputes over President Sarkozy's agenda on immigration control and integration diminished his credibility and the public perception of the President's legislative efficiency, which undermined the UMP's accommodative approach in 2012.

Therefore, this investigation highlights that intra-party conflicts within centre-right parties contain mixed effects the accommodative approaches towards ERPs, as they can either enhance or undermine the effectiveness of this strategic option. Thirdly, the large differential in the public ranking of the personal qualities of the UMP's and the FN's candidates was positively related with the effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approach in 2007. By contrast, the decline of President Sarkozy's popularity against Marine's progress in the public opinion were positively related with the diminished effectiveness of the UMP's convergence with the FN on immigration and integration in 2012. Therefore, the overall success of the UMP's accommodative approaches seemed more related with public appraisal of the centre-right and far-right candidates' personal qualities than with the levels of party resources or the observation of intra-party conflicts. These trends suggest that Sarkozy's accommodative approach in 2007 benefited from exceptional circumstances due to the FN candidate's deep credibility crisis. The

redployment of this strategic option in 2012 backfired in the face of a ERP challenger endowed with stronger credibility among the electorate.

Conclusions

This investigation associated the UMP's accommodative approach with the FN's electoral decline in 2007, whereas the adoption of a similar strategic option in 2012 was accompanied by the FN's best ever performance in a presidential ballot. The research also suggested that ERPs' immunity to a centre-right party's challenge is not perpetual and that an ERP's electoral support can be seriously weakened, in particular circumstances. ERPs' issue ownership of opposition to immigration can also be challenged by centre-right parties, even after the ERPs have become entrenched in their domestic political systems. Nonetheless, the 2012 presidential election showed that a centre-right party's adoption of accommodative approaches is not necessarily followed by the weakening of the ERP's electoral support, nor does it guarantee the overwhelming support of ERP voters for the centre-right party's candidate in order to secure a victory in the second round of a presidential ballot. Therefore, this research warns against the potential pitfalls of inducing the electoral outcomes from the mainstream parties' strategic options towards ERPs without conducting in-depth analyses of this political process. This article suggests that the short-term electoral effects of mainstream parties' accommodative approaches towards ERPs are a contingent political process with uncertain consequences.

The divergent effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approaches towards the FN in 2007 and 2012 was weakly related with the unequal electoral resources enjoyed by the right wing party whilst the intra-party conflicts contained ambivalent effects on the success of this strategic option. Thereby, the effects of internal disputes over immigration and integration on centre-right parties' strategies towards ERPs also have a contingent character, whose evaluation demands in-depth research. By contrast, the distinct effectiveness of the UMP's accommodative approaches was positively related with the discrepancy in terms of public perception of the personal qualities of these parties' candidates. Notwithstanding the convergence between the UMP's and the FN's political programmes in 2007 and 2012, this research suggests that ERP voters tend to opt for the 'original rather than the copy', when faced with a choice between a credible ERP candidate and an unpopular centre-right candidate. Thus, centre-right parties' accommodative approaches can eventually legitimise the ERP's electoral agenda. In the

long term, the continuous radicalisation of the centre-right party's positions on immigration and integration can have important repercussions at the internal level and may enhance the erosion of partisan loyalties among right wing parties.

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