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Party's rating and electoral forecasting: the case of French Presidential in 2022

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1. Introduction

This article is an updated and extended version of the electoral forecasting model devised by Lafay, Facchini and Auberger (2007), as applied to the French presidential election of 2007. In that paper, the authors argued that the economy had made an impact on the election results, and that the Socialist Party's approval ratings was another crucial complementary factor worth investigating. A minor contribution to current debates, the paper focused on the popularity of political parties, an aspect usually overlooked by political analysts and economists alike. It inferred, on the basis of an inductive approach, that the Socialist Party candidate generally wins elections in cases when its approval ratings poll over 50% by March – two months prior to the first round of election. By 2007, that index helped forecast Nicholas Sarkozy's victory over Ségolène Royale. Had it been updated in time, it could have been used to forecast François Hollande's victory over the incumbent Sarkozy, as well as Benoît Hamon's 2017 failure to reach the second round (appendix Figure A1).

Figure 1 displays approval ratings for the Socialist Party (SP) in March over the 1981-2017 period, the left's electoral results at the second round of presidential elections, and an index showing the splits on the left to account for Lionel Jospin's 2002 fiasco. As of 2002, the Socialist Party was credited with 52 % approval ratings, as opposed to 51 % in 2012, but while the left totaled only six candidates in 2012, it was fielding as many as eight in 2002, which split the left-wing vote, preventing the SP-affiliated candidate to qualify for the second round. Had he reached the second round, however, candidate Jospin would have been a likely winner in view of his party's popularity.

The SP's approval ratings, could not, however, have foreshadowed the success of Emmanuel Macron's success in adopting a centrist strategy at the 2017 elections. That particular electoral result runs counter to the idea that the SP's popularity is a solid indicator of who wins elections in France. Indeed, the SP's approval ratings are also revealing the balance of political forces competing at the 2022 presidential election. Does that suggest that examining the approval ratings of political parties has become a pointless exercise for anyone trying to forecast the electoral fate of a candidate?

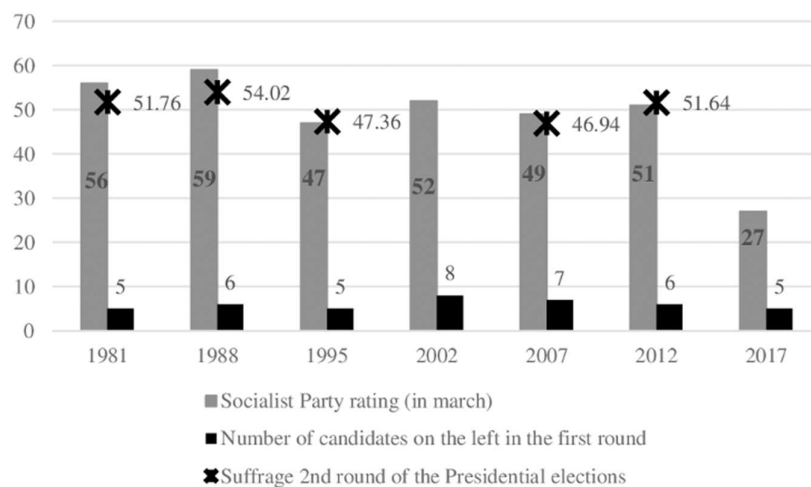
The answer of the paper is negative. Party rating can always be of use to predict the results of French presidential elections. It is structured in the following fashion. The introduction examines the topic at hand in light of the 2007 model. Section 2 justifies the central role given to party ratings in explaining and predicting candidates' scores in elections. It reminds us that the more political capital a party transmits to its candidate, the more important it is that the candidate has a low profile (2). Section 3 uses proxy model based on political party ratings to predict the first round of the 2022 election (3). Section 4 concludes the article with a second round prediction based on the results presented in section 3. Should the left in its entirety come out in support of the outgoing president and the extreme right voters likewise fall back on the right-wing candidate at the second round, the balance of power would be in Macron's favor by 53,7%. The odds of Valérie Pécresse (LR=*Les Républicains*) winning the second round are

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conditioned on i) massive abstention on the left (the 1969 scenario) and ii) systemic vote transfers from extreme right voters to the mainstream right candidate.

Figure 1. Popularity rating of the Socialist Party two months before the elections and political fragmentation of the left



Sources: *France Politique* for the electoral result. All the party rating of the SP were collected in the pages Political Barometer in Figaro Magazine. The TNS SOFRES Figaro Magazine political barometer became the Kantar-one Point Figaro Magazine political barometer. It is initially published in the first issue of the month of Figaro Magazine since 1978. The survey for Figaro Magazine is based on a national sample of 1,000 to 2,000 people, depending on the year, representative of the entire population aged 18 and over, interviewed face-to-face at home by the SOFRES network of pollsters. The rating of the political parties or opinion on the parties is based on the question: "What is your opinion of each of the following parties? (Very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad and very bad). The rating is the sum of the very good and rather good opinions.

2. The interplay between party and candidate

What is the rationale for using party ratings to predict election outcomes? Elections are essentially unequal in that they are slanted in favor of those candidates whose reputation is already established or who benefit from a party platform bolstering their political capital. The purpose of this section is to remind readers of the intricate interplay between a party's political capital and a candidate's social capital, which explains the reasons why one should pay close attention to political parties' approval ratings.

Ever since the late 19th century, political parties have played a central role in the political life of liberal democracies. An offshoot of labor movements, labor unions actively funded political actions conducted by the incipient Socialist Party. Hence, when investigating the range of existing political agendas in France, giving particular prominence to the Socialist Party's approval ratings was a sound approach. The invention of political parties contributed to widening the range of competing political agendas and to reshaping the socio-professional and sociopolitical makeup of assemblies. Overtime, squires gradually gave way to professional politicians. Elected officials could finally live off politics besides living for politics, since their parties were in a position to subsidize their campaigns using stipend collected from party members.

Socialists' efforts to raise the amount of subsidies afforded to politicians gave additional strength to political parties, notably in respect to candidate selection. This led to the view that instead of voters selecting their representatives, representatives are in fact the ones imposing their choices upon voters.

In these conditions, it is crucial to determine the extent to which political parties account for individual candidates' success. Each candidate owes their success both to their own personal reputation and to their affiliated party's reputation. Candidate reputation depends on factors such as local roots, history and a record of past electoral victories. The better-funded a party, the better equipped it is to campaign and promote the candidates it fields.

Politicians' favorability ratings are one way of estimating the reputation of candidates, whereas party approval ratings are indicative of a party's political capital. An election victory may be achieved once a candidate has amassed sufficient social capital (high fame ratings) and/or is fielded by a party with high political capital. A political figure low on popularity may yet win an election due to their affiliated parties' high reputation capital.

Not surprisingly given the history of partisan organizations, the Socialist Party as an organization tends to garner higher approval ratings than the candidates it fields (appendix Figure A1), hence the importance for left-wing candidates to benefit from their party's endorsements. Conversely, centrist parties such as the UDF (launched in 1978, UDF=Union for French Democracy), and right-wing parties such as the RPR (launched in 1976, RPR=Rally for the Republic) garner lower approval ratings (appendix Figure A2). This implies that, unlike their left-wing counterparts, candidates of right-wing parties need to overcome their party's comparatively lower prestige. For that reason, supplementing party approval ratings with individual candidate approval ratings is a fruitful step to take. How candidates fare depends both on their own reputation (approval ratings) and on their parties' reputation and perceived trustworthiness.

3. Parties, candidate ratings and first round election results

This approach, based on the political capital of parties and the social capital of candidates, explains why the SP's rating was a good predictor of the results of presidential elections from 1981 to 2012. It can, to a certain extent be remodeled to fit the framework of the 2022 French presidential election.

In a two-round plurality election, it is vital for first-round candidates to rally support from their base if they have any ambition of reaching the second round, let alone win the election.

Prior to the 2017 presidential election, the Socialist Party (SP) managed to coalesce the left, the greens and the far left (PCF=French Communist Party). Since 1981, the total left-wing vote tally since 1981 has been highly correlated with the Socialist Party's ratings, which have always been a robust tool for predicting the balance of power between the left and the right, and the left's electoral performance in general. Figure 2 shows the robustness of this relationship.

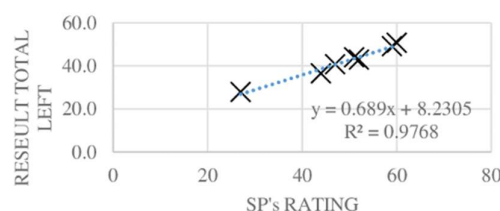
2017 was also the year when the right split away from the center. Until 2017 the center & the right had been in office together. At elections, they made common cause to gain and retain power. Their results logically reflected a function of the weakness of the left. A strong left weakened the center & the right. The reverse was true. It is on this empirical trend that the

Lafay et al. model (2007) was predicated. Extreme right success from the 1998 election onward, leading up to Jean-Marie Le Pen's unprecedented breakthrough to the second round in 2022, have made a lasting impact on the political balance for right-wing parties.

Figure 2.

The electoral weight of the left in the first round of elections (1981-2017) & the rating of the SP and its candidate

| | RESULT | SP's RATING |
|------|-------------|-------------|
| 1981 | 51 | 60 |
| 1988 | 49 | 59 |
| 1995 | 41 | 45 |
| 2002 | 43 | 52 |
| 2007 | 36 | 44 |
| 2012 | 44 | 51 |
| 2017 | 28 | 27 |
| 2022 | 24,8 | 24 |



Source: France Politique. and Political Barometer Kantar-One-Pont Figaro Magazine. The SP's rating is the rating of the month of march. The number of observations on presidential elections is 7 (N=7). R^2 = the coefficient of multiple determination.

The score of the center and right-wing parties is a function of the popularity of both the left-wing parties and the extreme right. Whenever the SP and the far right are strong, the center and mainstream right are predictably weak. A socialist party and far right strong weakens the center and the right. Figure 3 illustrates this interconnection. It shows the concomitant evolution of the scores of the center & right and the average ratings of the parties and candidates of the SP and the far right.

If the right wing and the center were still allied, this coalition would win the election with a 53.2% share of the vote. Today, however, the right and center no longer govern together. The center governs on its own, unaided by either the left nor the right.

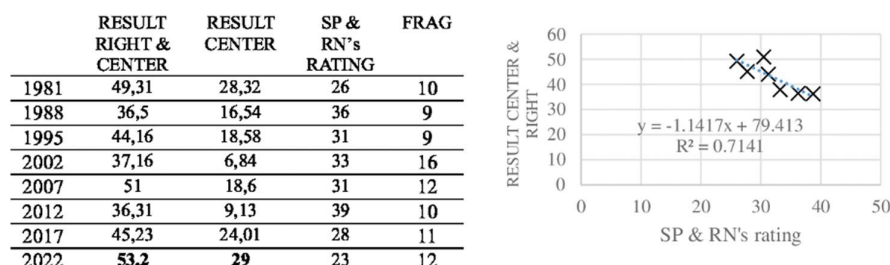
To distinguish the LR candidate from the incumbent, we can use the data in Figure 3. The results of the center evolve concomitantly with i) the number of candidates for the presidential election (FRAG= political fragmentation) and ii) the average of the popularity and future ratings of the SP and RN with future ratings of their respective fielded candidates. Centrist candidates are weak when the number of candidates running is high and when the ratings of the parties and candidates of the left and of the extreme right are high. The greater the political fragmentation, the less attractive the center becomes as voters can endorse a candidate who better fits their preferences.

The proxy model (Nadeau and al. 2012) is $SCORECENTER = -1,4722 \times [SP\&RN'sRATING + FRAG] + 80,685$ with $R^2 = 0,9514$. The value of 12 is taken for the number of candidates in the first round of the election. It is important to say that if the number of candidates is higher -14 for instance-, the percentage for Emmanuel Macron is 26%. The right can expect three points more votes.

On this basis, the candidate Emmanuel Macron is forecast to garner 29% of the vote in April 2022. This leaves 24.2% of the vote to the right-wing personified by Valérie Pécresse.

Figure 3.

The electoral weight of center & the right in the first round of the presidential elections & Average of SP's rating FN/RN's rating and their candidate



Sources : France Politique and Political Barometer Kantar-One-Pont Figaro Magazine with

$$SP\&RN'srating = \frac{(PS'srating+RN'srating+PS'scandidaterating+RN'scandidaturerating)}{4} \quad N=7.$$

(RN= *Rassemblement National*). The score of the center (CENTER RESULTS) refers to the score of the candidate fielded by the UDF, MODEM and LREM (MODEM = *Democratic Movement* & LREM=*Republic Onwards*). In chronological order, these candidates have been Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1981), Raymond Barre (1988), Edouard Balladur (1995), François Bayrou (2002-2007-2017 and Emmanuel Macron (2017). The RIGHT & CENTER scores is a blend made up of the CENTER scores with the scores of the right [RPR, UMP=Union for a Popular Movement and LR=The Republicans, whose candidates have been Jacques Chirac (1981-1988-1995-2002), Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and François Fillon (2017)-] as well as the scores of the smaller right-wing candidates (Debré & Garaud 1981, de Villiers 1995, Lepage, Boutin & Madelin 2002). The rating of candidates is their future rating or *cote d'avenir des personnalités politiques*. This rating is based on the answer to the following question: "For each of the following political figures, would you like to see him or her play an important role in the months and years to come?".

In turn, the far right gains strength whenever the mainstream right is weak. Far right results at the first round of elections evolves in the opposite direction of the individual candidate approval ratings of the mainstream right. On the basis of the equation of Figure 4 Marine Le Pen is predicted to collect 18,7% of the votes.

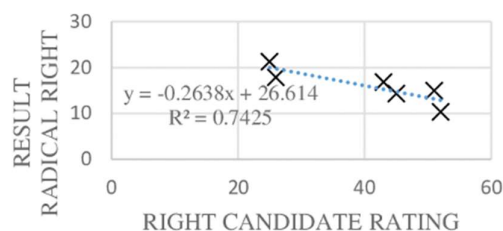
With regard to the first round results, candidates are expected to come in the following order in terms of vote share: Emmanuel Macron, Valérie Pécresse, Marine Le Pen, a left-wing candidate.

Smaller candidates of the mainstream and far-right may rack up as much as a 3.3% of the vote. It may be that around 3.3% of the vote go to smaller candidates of the right and far right. It is expected that the second round will pit Valérie Pécresse against Emmanuel Macron. The assumption here is that Valérie Pécresse needs to rack up all the right-wing votes – that is, not lose over 5,5% of the votes on its right (to candidates the likes of Eric Zemmour) – lest she be overtaken by Marine Le Pen as early the first round (18,7%). But what of the second round?

Figure 4.

The electoral weight of the extreme right in the first round of the presidential election and the ratings of mainstream right-wing parties (FN/RN & RPR/UMP/LR) and their leaders

| | RESULT | RIGHT |
|------|--------|-------|
| 1981 | | |
| 1988 | 14,38 | 45 |
| 1995 | 15 | 51 |
| 2002 | 16,86 | 43 |
| 2007 | 10,4 | 52 |
| 2012 | 17,9 | 26 |
| 2017 | 21,3 | 26 |
| 2022 | 18,7 | 30 |



Sources : France Politique and Political Barometer Kantar-One-Pont Figaro Magazine with $RIGHT = \frac{(RPR,UMP \& LR's \text{ ratio} + \text{Candidate's rating})}{2}$. N=6

4. Discussion of second round predictions

Second round results are bound to depend on the transfer of votes. Voters generally repeat their first round choices. Non-voters will abstain, while voters sympathetic to Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse will vote for them again. Voters settle on the candidate who are closest to their preferences. Voters on the far right are expected to vote for Valérie Pécresse while voters on the mainstream and left are supposed to come out in support of Emmanuel Macron. As a consequence of these two rules the second round results would place Valérie Pécresse at 46.2% (24.2 LR+18,7 RN+3,3 OTHER RIGHT) and Emmanuel Macron at 53.8% (24.8 Total Left + 29 LREM). A Macron victory is therefore the most likely outcome.

His victory, nonetheless, should not be taken for granted as the left may still massively abstain and hand victory to Valérie Pécresse. On the one hand, defeated left-wing candidates may well decline to instruct their voters to rally behind Macron as they did in 2012. This may well happen as no republican front could be reasonably invoked in the case of second round pitting the center against the mainstream right. On the other hand, abstention can be explained by a vote on priorities. If voters choose the candidate closest to their political preferences, the shift is from the left to the center. If voters base their choices on a single issue, such as exiting nuclear energy, they will not cast a vote in the second round; neither Macron nor Pécresse are willing to abandon nuclear energy. Moreover, a Macron-Pécresse second round would place left-wing voters in an uncomfortable situation some of them had already experienced in 1969; that of having to choose between two right-wing candidates. The consequences had been widespread abstention. In 1969 Duclos-Rocard & Krivine (left and extreme left respectively) instructed their voter base "not to vote". 62% of the voters of these fringe parties will follow such instructions, and the same may well apply in April 2022. More generally, since 1965 when the vote share of left-wing parties is low at the first round, the rate of abstention rate in the second round has been high. At last, already in 2017 only 54% of the Jean-Luc Mélenchon voters settled on Macron (Jaffré 2017). Emmanuel Macron's victory depends to a large extent on the decision of left-wing voters at the second ballot.

The use of the voting simulator of the Foundation for Political Innovation (FONDAPOL 2022) can help clarify the conditions of Valérie Pécresse's victoryⁱ. The simulator requires prior knowledge of the first round's results. The proxy model developed in this research gives the first round results of the four major political forces. i) First-round supporters of Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse would plausibly repeat their first-round decisions (100%). ii) On the right, voters who had initially pronounced in favor of Marine Le Pen, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan and François Asselineauⁱⁱ would overwhelmingly flock to Valérie Pécresse (around 80%, with 20% abstaining). iv) On the left, votes (25%) are distributed as follows: 15% for LFI and other far-left forces (Poutou and/or Arthaud), 3% for the socialist party and 8% for the green party. 70% of Jean-Luc Melenchon's voters are predicted to abstain, while 30% would vote for Emmanuel Macron. 40% of green party and SP voters would vote for Emmanuel Macron with the rest of them abstaining. Abstainers and voters who had cast a spoiled ballot would do the same at the second round. In this scenario, Valérie Pécresse wins the election by 51,58%.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7PVGLC>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

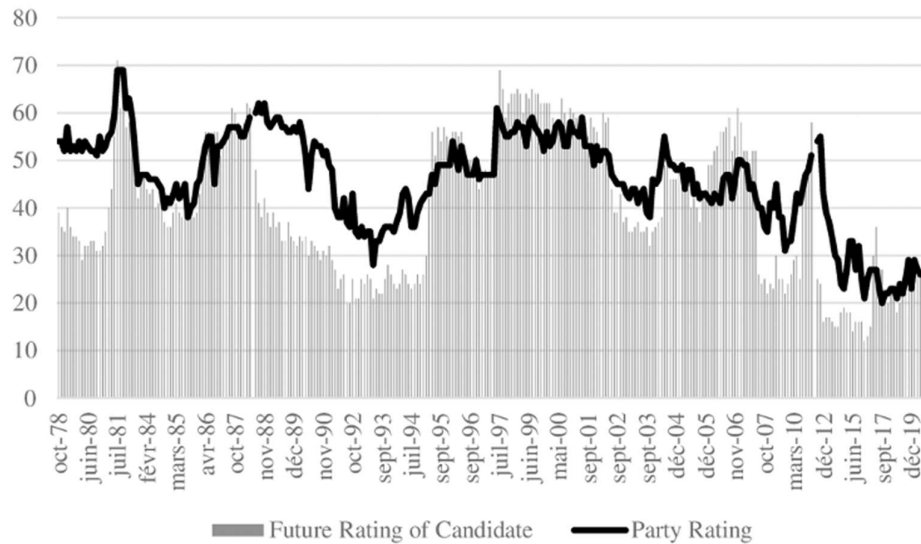
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i Qui en 2022. Simulateur de reports de voix pour la Fondation pour l'innovation politique. Link: <https://quien2022.fondapol.org/> (accessed on 08/01/2022).

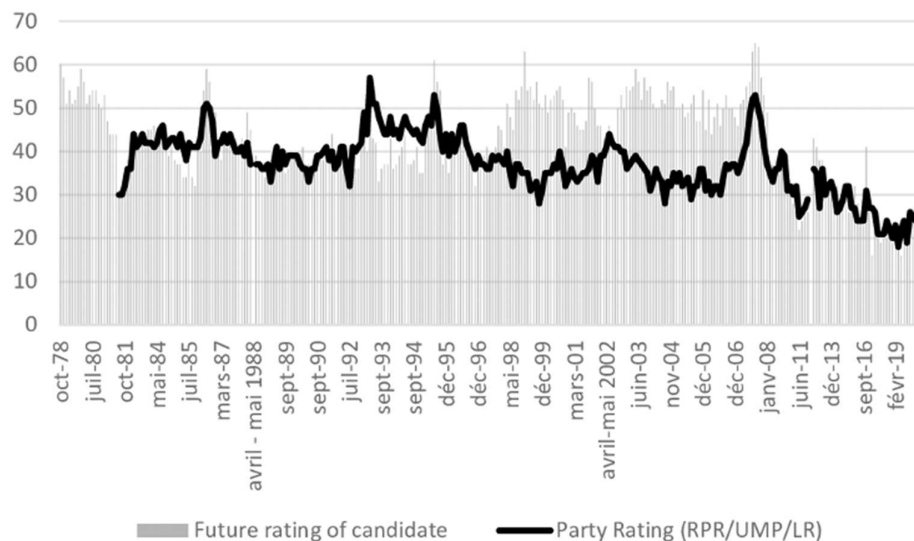
ii And Eric Zemmour, should he secure the required amount of endorsements to run.

Figure A1.



Source: Political Barometer TNS-SOFRES Figaro Magazine Kantar-One Point. Political Personality Mitterrand (1978-1988), Jospin (1988-2002), Royal (2002-2007), Hollande (2007-2012), Hamon (2012-2017), & Hidalgo (2017-2021).

Figure A2.



Source: Political Barometer TNS-SOFRES Figaro Magazine Kantar-One Point. Political Personality Giscard d'Estaing, Chirac (1981-2002), Sarkozy (2002-2012), Fillon (2012-2017) and Pécresse (2017-2021)