Who will solve France's problems? Candidate credibility on issues with top priority

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Next Sunday, French voters will be called to the polls for the first round of the Presidential elections. During the final days of the electoral campaign, we want to provide a meaningful overview and interpretation of the structure of issue competition in the French system. To this purpose, CISE has collected an original dataset through CAWI interviews on a representative sample of the French voting-age population.

In particular, in this article we focus on candidates' credibility on different issues. Our data includes a set of nine valence issues, on which there is by definition a consensual agreement (Stokes 1963). As we can see on the top of Table 1, three candidates are considered the most credible on achieving the related nine shared goals. Ordered by the highest number of issues they are the most-credible on, they are Emmanuel Macron, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Marine Le Pen.

Specifically, Macron ranks first on four valence issues, but shows minimal leads on other credible candidates on most of them. Furthermore, he is first on EU-related goals, which rank lowest in terms of priority. Only on "supporting economic growth" the once minister of the economy has a double-digit lead in percentage points on the second-most credible candidate (François Fillon). Mélenchon is the most credible candidate on three issues: fighting corruption, unemployment, and pollution. These are among the highest in terms of priority, if we except proception of the environment. However, he again shows minimal leads on the second-most credible candidates – ranging between 3 and 7 percentage points. Marine Le Pen is the most credible on the two remaining shared goals, protecting France from terrorism and making women more relevant in French society. The former, in particular, is the most salient of all issues in the French electorate, and also, by far, the shared goal on which the most-credible candidate shows the largest lead on the second (16 percentage points).

It is worth noting that the two candidates supported by the political parties that competed in the second round of the Presidential elections five years ago (Benoît Hamon for the PS, Fillon for the LR) are not considered the most credible on achieving any of the nine shared goals included in our survey.

Our data also features a set of 15 positional issues, on which respondents were asked to state their preferred goal between two rival ones, as well as the candidates they deemed credible to achieve it, and its relevance. On the 15 majority goals (preferred by more than 50% of respondents) the same three candidates appear as the most-credible: Le Pen, Macron, and Mélenchon. The candidate from FN is first six times, Macron on five issues, and Mélenchon on four.

The strong advantage of Le Pen on this set of goals is clear when looking at all our indicators. She does not only rank first on a higher number of issues, she ranks first on four of the five issues with the highest priority, which are all related to immigrants and threats to the French culture. Only Mélenchon with reducing income differences is the most credible on an issue that features a similar level of priority. Moreover, these goals are among the most supported. Between 70 and 80% of the French electorate support forbidding the Islamic veil in public spaces, restricting welfare for immigrants, making immigration rules more restrictive, and limiting the number of refugees. Furthermore, she enjoys the largest leads on the second-most credible candidates on these four issues that are so highly agreed upon. Even more so, she has leads which are three times as large as the largest shown by any other candidate on any other issue. Basically 50% of the French electorate (or just a little less) supports each of the four anti-immigrant goals *and* consider her credible in achieving them, with the second-most credible candidate being only a little above 10% in credibility. No other candidate on any issue shows a pattern even remotely comparable to these four. She is also the most credible on keeping soft drugs illegal and limiting economic globalization; but these goals are much less supported, they have lower priority levels, and she is not the only credible candidate – as shown by the low leads on the second-most credible candidates.

Macron is the most credible on issues related to social rights (gay marriages and abortion), job market deregulation, and pro-EU goals. Is it worth pointing out that over 60% of the French electorate favour both staying in the EU and in the Euro. Furthermore, these issues are more important to them than leaving is for the smaller fractions of voters who prefer these goals. However, Macron enjoys only marginal leads on all these issues, just a little larger on the European issues, on which a respondent out of four deems him credible and wants to stay. These are the best credibility scores except the aforementioned four by Le Pen.

Mélenchon appears as the most credible on classic economic left issues, plus green energy and euthanasia. His lead margins are, on average, a bit larger than Macron's, but still not comparable to Le Pen's.

Now we turn our focus to the 15 minority rival goals, those that were selected by a smaller fraction than their opposite. Looking at these, we have the addition of two candidates in the club of those being considered the most credible on at least one issue. Namely, they are Fillon, first on four of these minority goals, and Hamon (2 goals). The Republican candidate is the most credible on keeping using nuclear energy, not reducing income differences, keeping euthanasia illegal, and increasing pension age. In any case, only on the latter he shows a non-insignificant lead on the second-most credible candidate. Hamon ranks first, with minimal margins, on legalizing soft drugs and not giving way to welfare chauvinism.

Macron is the most credible in achieving two minority goals both related to keeping France open to the world (encouraging globalization and not restricting immigration rules). Mélenchon is the most credible on three minority goals. Two of them are related to openness towards the Muslim community. These are not particularly relevant, as they are among the least shared in terms of agreement, as well as the least salient – even among the small minorities favouring such goals. Furthermore, Mélenchon is the most credible only by a minimal lead on both of them. However, the third minority issue on which he ranks first ("keeping the current regulations in the job market") is probably the single most relevant one of all minority goals. This is the one with the highest support (48%) within the French electorate, the one with the highest level of priority (both in the whole electorate and within the portion favouring the goal) – so high that it is the only minority goal with an overall priority above some of the majority goals. On this goal Mélenchon has a lead on the second-most credible candidate (Le Pen), which, although being inferior to the average, ranks above the median value.

Once again, however, Le Pen appears to be in the best position also on minority goals. She is the most credible on a record-high of four instances (record shared with Fillon, as mentioned above). Furthermore, she is first on the two anti-European goal (leaving the EU and the Euro), which are shared by a little less than 40% of respondents (thus being among the most supported), and rank second and third in terms of level of priority. On these two issues we find that 21-24% of French voters agrees and considers Le Pen credible. These are by far the largest credibility scores by any candidates on any minority goal – no other reaches 15%. Moreover, her credibility gap on achieving such goals compared to the second-most credible candidate is not even comparable to the highest ones observed on minority goals by other candidates – five to six times larger. She is also first on repealing gay marriages and restricting access to abortion, although these goals are much less agreed upon, and definitely not as salient as the EU-related ones.

Table 1. Shared and divisive goals, by public opinion support, with most credible parties

Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		Δ 1st-2nd
Protect France from the terrorist threat	100%	91%	91%	Le Pen	36%	Fillon	20%	Macron	17%	Mélenchon	17%	+16
Fight unemployment	100%	91%	91%	Mélenchon	23%	Macron	20%	Le Pen	20%	Fillon	13%	+3
Fight corruption	100%	84%	84%	Mélenchon	24%	Le Pen	17%	Macron	16%	Hamon	13%	+7
Improve the quality of education	100%	82%	82%	Macron	21%	Mélenchon	19%	Le Pen	16%	Hamon	15%	+2
Support economic growth	100%	80%	80%	Macron	28%	Fillon	18%	Mélenchon	17%	Le Pen	17%	+11
Protect the environment	100%	75%	75%	Mélenchon	21%	Hamon	17%	Macron	13%	Arthaud	12%	+3
Make women's role in society more important	100%	69%	69%	Le Pen	24%	Arthaud	18%	Macron	16%	Mélenchon	15%	+6
Make France count more in Europe	100%	66%	68%	Macron	27%	Le Pen	21%	Fillon	19%	Mélenchon	15%	+6
Make EU more democratic	100%	64%	64%	Macron	20%	Mélenchon	17%	Hamon	14%	Fillon	14%	+3
Limit the number of refugees	79%	80%	63%	Le Pen	50%	Fillon	12%	Dupont	7%	Macron	7%	+38
Make immigration rules more restrictive	73%	82%	60%	Le Pen	47%	Fillon	11%	Dupont	7%	Macron	5%	+35
Reduce income differences	75%	77%	58%	Mélenchon	24%	Hamon	12%	Le Pen	12%	Macron	10%	+12
Restrict welfare for immigrants	70%	79%	55%	Le Pen	44%	Fillon	9%	Dupont	5%	Macron	4%	+35
Forbid Islamic veil in public spaces	78%	70%	54%	Le Pen	48%	Fillon	11%	Macron	8%	Dupont	6%	+37
Keep access to abortion	81%	66%	53%	Macron	22%	Hamon	18%	Mélenchon	17%	Le Pen	10%	+3
Legalise euthanasia	79%	61%	48%	Mélenchon	13%	Macron	12%	Hamon	10%	Le Pen	9%	+2

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Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		Δ 1st-2nd
Lower pension age	66%	73%	48%	Mélenchon	21%	Le Pen	12%	Hamon	10%	Poutou	7%	+9
Stay in the Euro	63%	76%	48%	Macron	27%	Fillon	20%	Hamon	17%	Mélenchon	11%	+7
Stay in the EU	62%	73%	45%	Macron	25%	Fillon	19%	Hamon	16%	Mélenchon	10%	+7
Limit economic globalisation	63%	67%	42%	Le Pen	20%	Mélenchon	16%	Poutou	6%	Hamon	5%	+4
Abandon nuclear energy	57%	66%	37%	Mélenchon	14%	Hamon	8%	Le Pen	6%	Macron	6%	+6
Deregulate the job market	52%	70%	36%	Macron	15%	Fillon	12%	Le Pen	9%	Mélenchon	8%	+3
Keep current regulations in the job market	48%	72%	35%	Mélenchon	14%	Le Pen	10%	Macron	9%	Hamon	9%	+3
Keep gay marriages	67%	49%	33%	Macron	21%	Hamon	18%	Mélenchon	17%	Arthaud	7%	+3
Keep soft drugs illegal	55%	58%	32%	Le Pen	12%	Fillon	11%	Macron	8%	Mélenchon	5%	+1
Leave the EU	38%	69%	26%	Le Pen	24%	Mélenchon	4%	Dupont	3%	Asselineau	2%	+19
Leave the Euro	37%	69%	25%	Le Pen	21%	Mélenchon	4%	Macron	2%	Fillon	2%	+17
Keep using nuclear energy	43%	56%	24%	Fillon	13%	Macron	10%	Le Pen	8%	Mélenchon	4%	+3
Encourage economic globalisation	37%	56%	21%	Macron	12%	Fillon	8%	Hamon	4%	Le Pen	3%	+4
Legalise soft drugs	45%	46%	21%	Hamon	11%	Mélenchon	8%	Macron	5%	Le Pen	3%	+3
Increase pension age	34%	59%	20%	Fillon	15%	Macron	8%	Le Pen	4%	Mélenchon	3%	+7
Keep current immigration rules	27%	67%	18%	Macron	8%	Mélenchon	8%	Hamon	8%	Le Pen	3%	+0
Keep welfare for immigrants	30%	59%	17%	Hamon	10%	Mélenchon	9%	Macron	7%	Arthaud	4%	+0

Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st		2nd		3rd		4th		Δ 1st-2nd
Repeal gay marriages	33%	46%	15%	Le Pen	9%	Fillon	5%	Dupont	1%	Mélenchon	1%	+4
Don't reduce income differences	25%	55%	14%	Fillon	5%	Macron	5%	Le Pen	4%	Mélenchon	2%	+0
Accept more refugees	21%	56%	12%	Mélenchon	6%	Hamon	5%	Macron	4%	Poutou	2%	+1
Keep euthanasia illegal	21%	49%	10%	Fillon	3%	Le Pen	3%	Macron	2%	Hamon	2%	+0
Authorise Islamic veil in public spaces	22%	43%	10%	Mélenchon	5%	Hamon	5%	Macron	4%	Fillon	2%	+0
Restrict access to abortion	19%	47%	9%	Le Pen	4%	Fillon	2%	Hamon	1%	Macron	1%	+2

To further investigate whether the credibility measures we have collected might shed some more light on the electoral prospects of the various candidates, we compare vote intentions and credibility scores for each of them. As we can see in Table 2, vote intentions are basically concentrated on five options, enjoying over 90% of valid vote intentions. For the five major candidates, if we compare their vote intention shares (as percentage of the overall electorate) with the average credibility they were assigned (again by the whole sample), we can see that only Hamon has ratios (slightly) above 1. Fillon is at 1 on valence goals, but below on positional goals (0.84). Mélenchon is close to 1 on valence goals, but at 0.67 on positional. Macron is even lower, at 0.8 on valence and at 0.56 on positional goals. As predictable, the most-polarizing candidate, Marine Le Pen, ranks last in terms of credibility on valence goals with a ratio of 0.72. However, and interestingly, she is the only candidate with a higher average credibility on positional goals, which means a higher ratio – 0.74, thus higher than both Mélenchon and Macron.

Overall, we can conclude that, despite the indication in our data of the presence of some kind of a "French agenda", as indicated by the incredibly high priority scores reported by many valence issues and that a few divisive goals are supported by strong majorities (five of the fifteen positional issues split 3 to 1 or even less balanced than that), no candidate has been able to become credible on achieving these unifying goals beyond his or her own electorate. Clearly, the various candidates do sometimes show higher level of credibility on occasional issues, but none shows a similar pattern consistently. There appears to be significant social cohesion on a number of goals, some of which are in theory conflictual, but not so much in reality – as we observe empirically. However, there is no agreement on who should carry them out.

This picture is very different from what we have recently found in an analogous investigation of the Dutch case (Paparo, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume). There, we found a much more fragmented vote intention distribution, significantly less agreement on divisive goals, but also credibility patents assigned by voters to parties other than their own. In short, we observe social fragmentation + political cooperation in the Netherlands compared to social homogeneity + political polarization in France.

The comparison with the analyses yields some additional interesting elements. In the Netherlands, we only had five valence issues, and four different parties emerged as the most credible in achieving the related shared goals. In France, we have nine valence goals, and only three candidates are the most credible on at least one of them. On the fifteen majority goals, the same three candidates rank first at least once, while in the Netherlands six different parties were first in credibility on at least one of the 15 majority goals. Finally, on the 15 minority goals, we have a total of five candidates with at least one goal they are the most credible on, while there are eight parties in this position in

Table 2. Party vote shares and credibility scores in the whole sample

	Arthaud	Poutou	Mélenchon	Hamon	Macron	Dupont	Le Pen	Fillon	Cheminade	Asselineau	Lassalle
Candidate vote intention	1.8%	2.7%	15.5%	7.6%	18.4%	2.5%	21.4%	10.3%	0.1%	0.4%	0.6%
Average credibility											
Valence goals	5.6%	4.1%	14.7%	10.7%	15.3%	5.1%	15.4%	10.4%	1.6%	2.1%	2.8%
Positional goals (all)	2.8%	3.1%	10.3%	8.3%	10.8%	3.2%	15.8%	8.7%	1.1%	1.5%	1.5%
Ratios (credibility/votes)											
Shared goals	3.09	1.51	0.95	1.41	0.83	2.05	0.72	1.01	15.80	5.13	4.49
Divisive goals (all)	1.58	1.13	0.67	1.09	0.59	1.27	0.74	0.84	10.82	3.76	2.45

the Netherlands. Admittedly, we polled fourteen parties in the Dutch case, while we only have eleven candidates in our French study (all those running for the 2017 presidential elections). Nevertheless, this is clearly not the whole story. It appears that the Dutch parties have been more capable in cultivating their own areas of issue ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), even specializing on a single one of them to the extent of becoming single-issue parties in some cases.

In the French case, only Le Pen appears to have a clear area of issue ownership on demarcation policies. One that, by the way, provides her with a formidable competition weapon to attract voters in terms of the issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014; De Sio, Franklin, and Weber 2016). Even greater than the one emerged for Wilders's party in the Dutch case. This is evident by considering the higher support and priority rates enjoyed by these goals in the French electorate, and the higher credibility scores and leads on the second-most credible actor for Le Pen compared to the PVV. Yet no other French candidate can be seen to enjoy any issue ownership.

Clearly the Netherlands and France have very different institutional systems which might provide an explanation of such profound social and political differences observed between the two cases. The different electoral system plays a crucial role. In the Netherlands, the national proportional system virtually without any representation threshold provides a particularly favourable setting for parties – even small – to cultivate their own areas of issue ownership, and be electorally rewarded on them. On the other hand, French candidates run for the Presidency of the Republic. As such, they are compelled with proposing solutions to all relevant political problems, which makes it harder for them to develop ownership on specific issues. Furthermore, only the two receiving the most votes will participate in the second round, which makes small candidates much more vulnerable to strategic considerations by voters than in the Dutch case, and this can account for the concentration for the vote on fewer options observed in France.

A second element needs to be stressed in this discussion: the different national histories of government formation. In the Netherlands coalition government are the standard, so voters have seen multiple parties cooperate in ruling the country (to a quite satisfactory extent), either with or without their preferred one in the coalition. This seems to have a positive influence in the ability of Dutch voters to perceive more than simply their own party as able to achieve desirable political goals. In France, on the contrary, coalition governments are not highly regarded. The cohabitation cases have proved to be so extremely polarizing and low-efficiency that they have been made by law much more unlikely to occur thanks to the synchronization in the length of presidential and legislative offices. Most importantly, since 2002, the legislative elections have been scheduled just after the presidential elections. These

might be among the reasons why voters seem to desire a government by their candidate, with no other outcome considered acceptable.

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