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# ERIC ZEMMOUR AND HIS RISE ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



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# ERIC ZEMMOUR AND HIS RISE ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

When French pundit Eric Zemmour announced his Presidential run on 30 November 2021, he did it on YouTube instead of holding a press conference. Using nostalgic footage of moments in French history to the sound of Beethoven's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, he harkened back to the days of old, aligning himself with French leaders such as Charles de Gaulle and Napoleon while referencing literary figures such as Voltaire, Rousseau and Victor Hugo.<sup>1</sup> Within moments of being posted, the video had been viewed 90,000 times.

The 2016 US elections and UK Brexit referendum have illuminated the potential abuse of social media by political campaigns. The Cambridge Analytica scandal – when Facebook breached data protection laws by failing to keep users' personal information secure and allowing the harvesting of data of up to 87 million people without their consent worldwide – showed the “psychological warfare tool” that a social media platform could become.<sup>2</sup>

France is now grappling with the same questions during its 2022 Presidential elections. The success Zemmour has enjoyed on social media is unparalleled in this election. Despite multiple convictions for hate speech, his exponential growth on social media as a Presidential candidate has put him at the centre of the political debate in France.

Despite being in the mediatic sphere for decades, Zemmour's social media presence has exploded over the last year, generating more engagement online at one point than any other candidate, including the French President Emmanuel Macron. Part of this popularity has been his ability to stir controversy and produce polarising content, which social media algorithms then amplify. While Zemmour has explained the rise of his social media presence as an organic growth in supporters and the popularity of his messages, investigations by media outlets into his campaign strategies show that several techniques have been used to expand his reach online.

This report examines his presence on four platforms: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, and outlines the tactics used by Zemmour to expand his reach and amplify his message more successfully than certain established rival candidates, such as Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron.

# KEY SUMMARY

- Zemmour has centred social media at the core of his electoral campaign and has been more successful than other candidates in using it to spread his far-right rhetoric.
- On Telegram, an analysis of 100 far-right French channels shows that Zemmour was much more successful in getting his Twitter and YouTube content shared on the platform than Le Pen. Le Pen, however, had more success in getting her Facebook links shared.
- On Facebook, Zemmour has kept his campaign ads vague enough to avoid breaking the French electoral code, which limits political advertising in the six months before election.
- Out of the three candidates, Zemmour does not have the highest number of followers on Facebook but his interaction rate with followers is significantly higher than his opponents, and he has the highest number of posts within the period examined.
- Reconquête, Zemmour's political party, has also spent more than double the amount on Facebook ads (€36,957) than its far-right competitor, Le Pen's Rassemblement National (€15,203) within the examined period.
- On YouTube, Zemmour exceeds Le Pen and Macron in views and subscribers despite having fewer videos. He and his affiliates have also received speaking time on other influential French YouTube channels, such as Papacito's.
- Zemmour's controversial statements on mainstream media platforms easily translate to trending on social media and this has contributed to the excessive attention from news organisations, even before he officially announced he was running.
- Overall, it is clear that Zemmour has focused more heavily on social media than his main rivals, having identified it as a way to reach large, younger audiences and bypass electoral restrictions for TV channels. In this regard, he has been successful.
- Through this Presidential election, Zemmour has become a rallying point for the far right.

# WHO IS ZEMMOUR?

Eric Zemmour has often been likened to former US President Donald Trump, both for his rise in popularity as a Presidential candidate and his casual racism on social media. Zemmour has stated he wishes to ban “non-French” names such as Muhammad,<sup>3</sup> has argued that employers should be able to turn down Arab or black people as applicants,<sup>4</sup> and that men should hold political power.<sup>5</sup> Like Trump and other populists, Zemmour has also framed himself as an outsider speaking the truth, unlike the “political and media elite”.<sup>6</sup> Zemmour has stated he wants to speak for the French who are disregarded by the powerful and has promised to “reconquer” French sovereignty.

The name of his political party is indicative of the type of campaign Zemmour is running: one focused on stopping immigration to France. Reconquête, or ‘reconquest’, refers to the Reconquista that expelled Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 and 1609. This expulsion also involved thousands of forced conversions to Catholicism, torture and burnings. The word Reconquête was also utilised by Generation Identitaire, a far-right anti-migrant group banned in France in 2021 for incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his fascist, racist and Islamophobic ideals – and unlike his Presidential opponent Marine Le Pen – Zemmour is not a product of France’s fascist circles. He was born in 1958 to Algerian Jewish parents and raised near Paris. Eric is not his birth name, but the Presidential candidate told radio station RMC he changed his Moroccan birth name “for the love of France”.<sup>8</sup> After graduating from the elite university Sciences Po, he became a well-known figure within journalistic circles, spending 35 years writing for several mainstream papers such as *Le Quotidien de Paris* and *le Figaro*, as well as having a popular talk show on France 2.

Before announcing his candidacy, he was an editor on CNews. The channel is owned by Vincent Bolloré, a traditionalist Catholic who

disapproves of President Emmanuel Macron after the latter criticised him<sup>9</sup> and is believed to have established CNews as a French counterpart to Fox News in the US. Zemmour has used this platform to push, amongst other things, his anti-Muslim agenda.

Zemmour prides himself on his intellect, often referencing moments in history to suit the political narrative he is creating. One narrative he has embraced is the Great Replacement theory – a white nationalist conspiracy theory that states the ethnic white population is being demographically and culturally replaced, with the help of a small elite, by a non-white and specifically Arab and sub-Saharan Muslim populations through mass migration and demographic changes. The theory was first described by French far-right writer Renaud Camus and was part of the manifesto written by the white supremacist who murdered 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019. Zemmour said in March 2022 that while Ukrainian refugees with connections to France were welcome, Arab and Muslim immigrants were “too unlike us” to be allowed in the country.<sup>10</sup>

Zemmour’s influence as both a journalist and television pundit has shaped political debate in the media and he has a long history of courting controversies. One storm he ignited occurred in 2019 when he paid tribute to General Bugeaud, who he says, “massacred Muslims and even some Jews” during the colonisation of Algeria, because “that is what it means to be French”.<sup>11</sup> Zemmour was on trial in November 2021 after saying on TV that unaccompanied minors arriving in France were “thieves and rapists” and that France “must send them back”. In January 2022, he was convicted of hate speech (he is appealing this ruling). This follows two previous convictions for incitement to racial or religious hatred – the first in 2011 for saying employers should be allowed to discriminate against black and Arab applicants on the channel Canal+, and the second in 2018 for describing the invasion of Muslims on the channel France 5.<sup>12</sup>



Zemmour has not only been criticised for his anti-Muslim hate. In 2019, he expressed the belief that homosexuality was “a matter of choice”.<sup>13</sup> He was the focus of legal action by gay rights groups, who say he denied that homosexuals were sent to concentration camps during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II.<sup>14</sup> He has also been called an anti-Semite by French Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia.<sup>15</sup> Zemmour said in 2021 that Dreyfus – the French-Jewish army captain of German descent whose prosecution on espionage claims was widely condemned as antisemitic – could have been targeted “for being German, not for being Jewish.” He’s also defended Philippe Pétain, who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II and helped to send many Jews from France to Nazi concentration camps.<sup>16</sup>

Since becoming a French Presidential candidate, Zemmour continues to attract a disproportionate amount of media attention. Events such as one of his first rallies, in the Parisian suburb of Villepinte – which erupted into violence when his far-right and neo-Nazi<sup>17</sup> supporters beat up antiracist activists who were demonstrating against Zemmour – have helped him remain the focus of the news cycle.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA RISE

While Zemmour’s social media growth looks like an overnight success after he announced he was running for President, his team’s strategy involved advanced planning before his campaign launched. One investigation revealed<sup>18</sup> that during the summer of 2021, months before Zemmour announced his candidacy, his affiliates had already been creating websites in support of Zemmour, including stopcensure.fr (stop censor), gilets-jaunes-avec-zemmour.fr (yellow jackets with Zemmour) and even lesmairesavec-zemmour.fr (the mayors with Zemmour). These sites were used to encourage the collection of as many supporter contact details as possible. More ambiguous websites were also created, such as a page asking people to sign a petition against censoring. All these sites were created by Les Amis d’Eric Zemmour (The Friends of Eric Zemmour) and the sign ups allowed the harvesting of contact details. This association had the public goal of getting Zemmour to run for President and supporters were also asked for donations to support his future political campaign. By the time he announced his candidature on 10 October, the groups supporting him had had months to collect contact details and generate followers.

Zemmour also has a highly motivated team coordinated by his director of digital strategy, Samuel Lafont. Vincent Bresson, a French journalist who infiltrated Zemmour’s campaign, and is interviewed in this report, said that hundreds of volunteers actively joined a wide range of Facebook groups – from cat lovers to protest groups – so as to post pro-Zemmour content. By flooding Facebook groups, and commenting as much as possible, Zemmour’s profile was amplified on the platform. Bresson describes how volunteers could copy ready-made content from Zemmour’s website and then paste into dozens of different groups. Another group of volunteers focused on editing Wikipedia entries related to Zemmour, and Bresson explains that their aim was to raise the candidate’s profile by linking his page and citing his views on as many different Wikipedia

pages as possible. These successful attempts at artificially increasing Zemmour's reach can be seen on several of his social media profiles.

## ANALYSIS OF FOUR PLATFORMS

This report looks into four platforms – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram – to examine his success in expanding his reach in comparison to two other candidates: Marine Le Pen, the alternative far-right party in this election, and Emmanuel Macron, who has an established social media presence as the President of France. They are also two of the top candidates in the polls, and were the final two contenders in the last French elections.

## YOUTUBE

Zemmour created his official YouTube channel in April 2021. However, despite the channel being less than a year old and having just over 100 videos, he has accrued 448 thousand subscribers, nearly double that of Macron and nearly eight times Le Pen's number of subscribers.

Despite the other candidates having more content on their channels, most of their videos have significantly fewer views. Zemmour has acquired more than 50 million views on his YouTube channel by the start of March 2022, compared to 17 million for Macron and 6 million for Le Pen. His most watched video has been viewed 5.6 million times and was posted in December 2021, focusing on one of his debates. In comparison, Macron's most watched video was posted in March 2018 about a trip to India and has just 1.5 million views. Meanwhile Le Pen only has one video with more than a million views and it dates back to her last Presidential campaign.

Zemmour has been very successful in pushing his YouTube video links on other platforms, such as Telegram. He has also been active in speaking (or getting his affiliates to speak) on the channels of other YouTubers. An investigation by *Le Monde* in March 2022 looked into the speaking time of French Presidential candidates and their representatives on high profile Twitch and YouTube channels from 1 January to 4 March 2022. Zemmour and his affiliates spoke for a total of 8 hours and 24 minutes, exceeding Le Pen who spoke for 4 hours and 44 minutes and Macron who stood at just 34 minutes.<sup>19</sup>

One of the important influencers behind Zemmour is Damien Rieu, the co-founder of

the far-right anti-immigrant group Generation Identitaire (that was dissolved for incitement to discrimination, hate and violence), who joined Reconquête. Rieu is a heavyweight influencer on Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and YouTube. Another influencer who has supported Zemmour on the platform is Papacito, a well-known YouTuber in France, who also has a large following on Telegram and Facebook (he was banned from Twitter).

YouTube is increasingly the platform of choice for the young, rather than traditional TV channels, and Zemmour has understood that trend.<sup>20</sup> He even announced he was running for the French elections on the platform – within three days it had amassed 2.6 million views as well as being shown on most TV news channels.<sup>21</sup> The video was later removed and Zemmour was convicted over copyright infringement for the clips he used in it.<sup>22</sup> Far-right influencers including Baptiste Marchais and Le Raptor, have also supported Zemmour on their channels, helping to boost his popularity. Zemmour's support on YouTube (and other platforms) has been aided by his digital campaign group's ability to use the Internet culture of memes and gifs to appeal to the relevant age ranges. Analysing Zemmour's use of YouTube provides a useful indication that he is perhaps focusing more energy on gaining reach from social media influence than his electoral rivals.

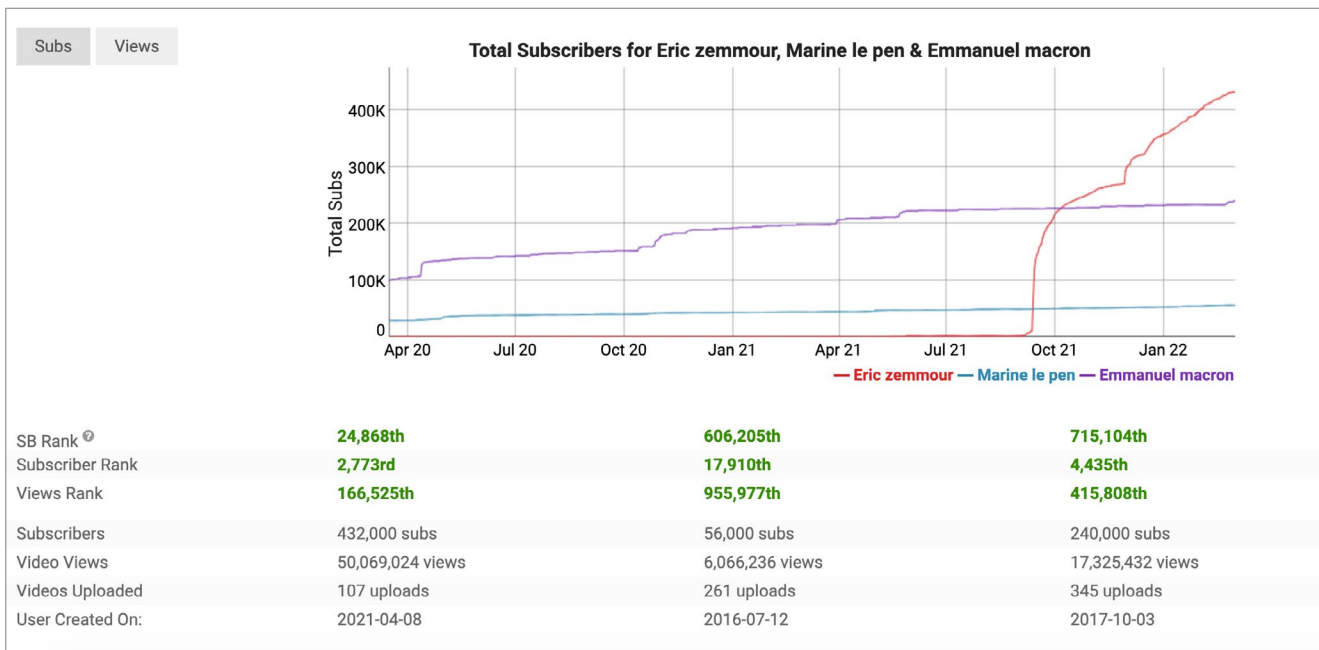
## FACEBOOK

This section examines posted content by Zemmour, Le Pen and Macron during 14 months from 1 January 2021 to 1 March 2022 using CrowdTangle as a comparison tool.

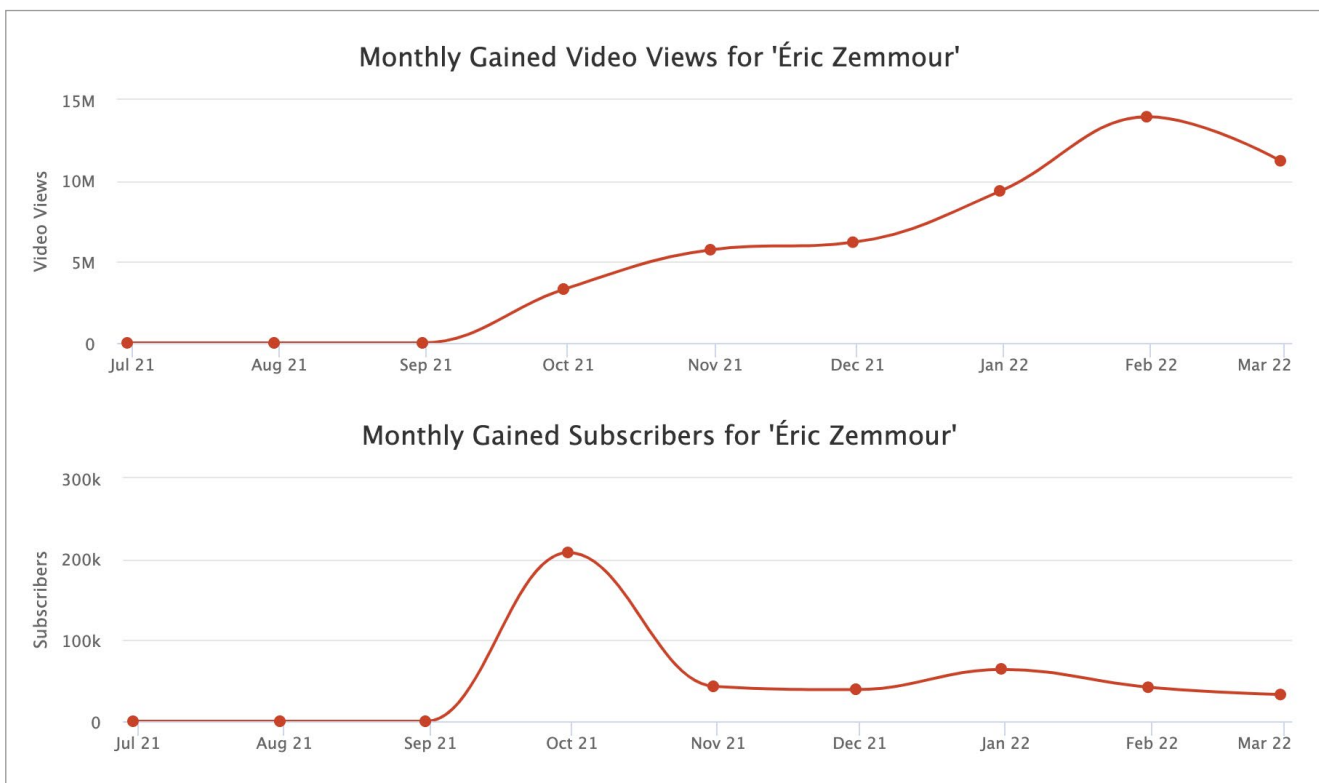
Unlike YouTube, Zemmour does not have the highest number of followers on Facebook: by March 2022, he had reached 271.3 thousand followers compared to Le Pen's 1.62 million and Macron's 4.32 million. Their official Facebook pages also show Zemmour lagging behind Le Pen in the overall number of interactions and shares, and behind Macron for total number of comments – this can be explained by having been on the platform for a shorter length of time.

However, despite a smaller audience, Zemmour's activity on the platform is much higher than his opponents. Within the period examined, Zemmour posted 2,000 pieces of content on Facebook, compared to 1,500 for Le Pen and under 500 for Macron. Zemmour also had a much higher interaction rate per post with his followers. CrowdTangle was used





Comparing subscribers on YouTube for Macron, Le Pen and Zemmour



Increase in number of subscribers and views on Eric Zemmour's YouTube Channel

to account for weighting and to add up all the interactions of all the posts. This was then divided by the number of posts and then again by the average account size (followers/page likes) within the 14 months.<sup>23</sup>

All three candidates had around 30% of their content on Facebook as videos, but due to his higher post rate, Zemmour had 691 Facebook

videos (compared to 211 for Macron and 388 for Le Pen). Zemmour's Facebook videos also had a combined total view of 47.78 million (compared to 38.56 million for Macron and 31.08 million for Le Pen) and a greater number of shares.

Zemmour's campaign team have used Facebook in several ways to amplify his reach beyond extensive posting and engagement

with supporters. One investigation<sup>24</sup> found Facebook groups with thousands of followers had been created as early as 2020 specifically to promote Zemmour’s candidacy in the 2022 election. Facebook groups such as Les Femmes Avec Zemmour (Women with Zemmour) and Les Jeunes Avec Zemmour (The Young with Zemmour) promoted his public appearances and amplified his reach. The accounts are often similar in theme and share the same posts. This coordination to promote his campaign was used by Zemmour on several platforms.

Zemmour’s political party Reconquête has also spent more than double the amount on Facebook ads than its far-right competitor, Le Pen’s Rassemblement National. From 15 April 2019 to 16 March 2022, Reconquête’s official Facebook page spent €36,957 on ads, compared to €15,203 for Rassemblement National.

Zemmour’s team has also managed to game France’s electoral code with its ad campaign. The electoral code’s article L52-1 prevents advertisement for a political candidate in the six months before the election in the press or online.<sup>25</sup> Since 1 October 2021, political candidates were therefore not allowed to ask for votes on Facebook (or any other platform).

However, Reconquête has continued to post ads referencing the political party rather than the candidate on Facebook and Instagram. These do not contravene the electoral code as the ads do not directly ask for votes. One recent example is: “Already 100,000 French people have become members of Reconquête, join us”. Since the ads do not directly reference

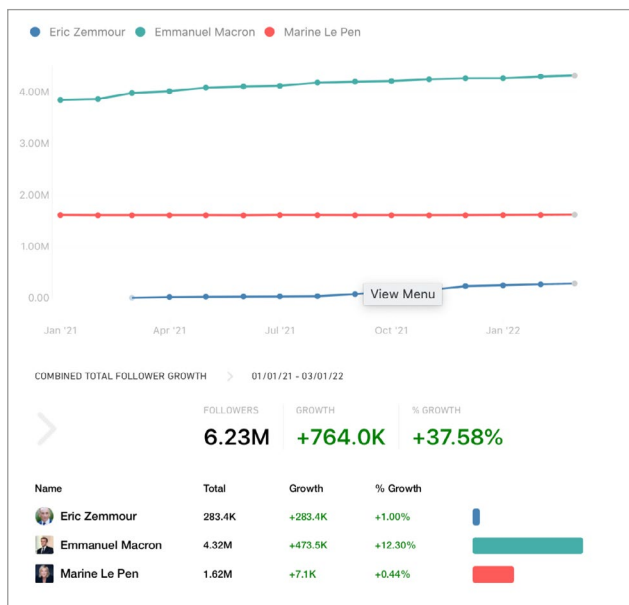
the election or the candidate, they fall within the acceptable remit of the electoral code.

Antoine Diers, spokesperson for Zemmour, told *France Inter*: “People don’t know the laws. Do you see the name of Eric Zemmour or a reference to the election? No, the ad calls for supporters to a political group.”<sup>26</sup>

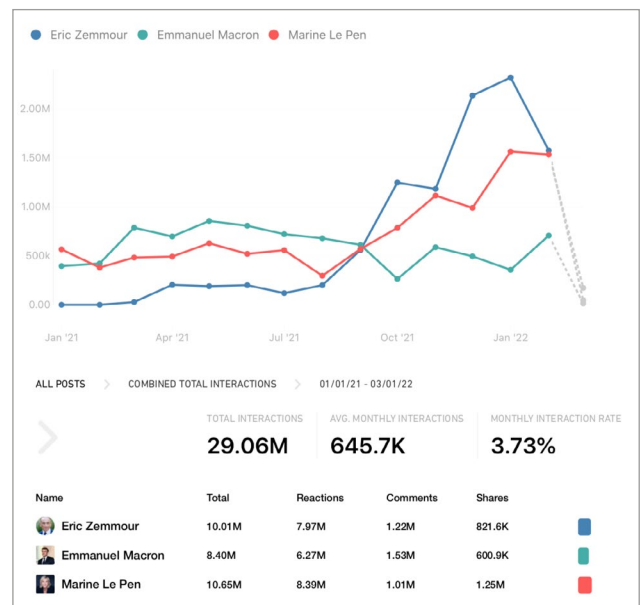
The Cambridge Analytica scandal has shown how effective Facebook can be in targeting potential voters with the right ads and Zemmour has posted more and spent more on Facebook ads than Macron and Le Pen. Reconquête ads have also been seen by more users than Rassemblement National’s ads asking for donations. His interaction rate with his followers is also much higher than his competitors and he has focused on producing a lot of video content. This expert use of Facebook to electoral ends has contributed to his success. Unlike Macron and Le Pen, Zemmour did not have an established political party at the start of this election season. His use of social media as a central pillar of his campaign has helped bolster his support and gain prominence.

## TWITTER

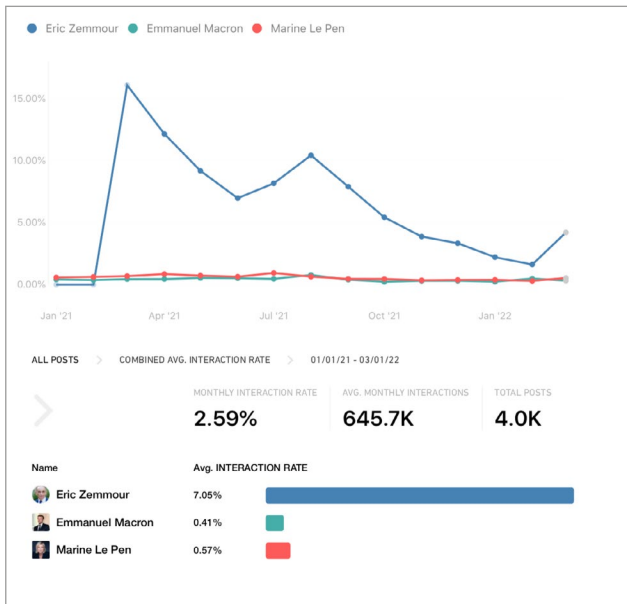
Zemmour joined Twitter in October 2019, and gained 380.4 thousand followers by March 2022. While his team is exceptionally active online, an investigation by *Le Monde*<sup>27</sup> concluded the party used the technique of astroturfing to artificially increase his numbers – which is against Twitter policy.<sup>28</sup> The practice involved masking the sponsors of a message



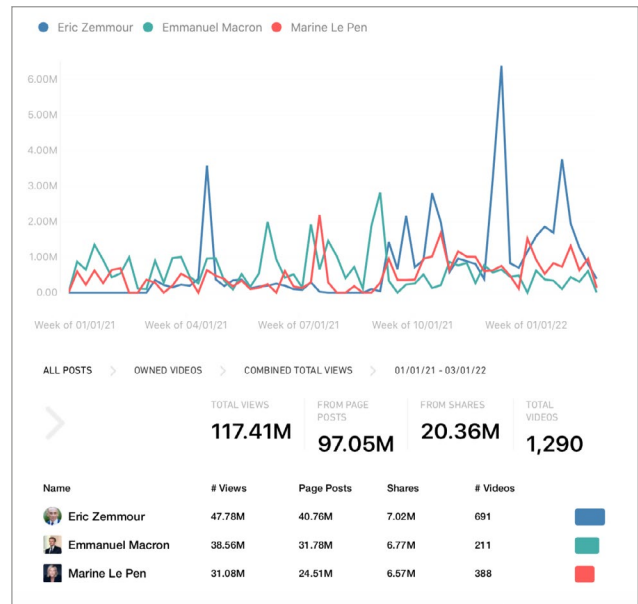
Total number of followers for Zemmour, Macron and Le Pen on Facebook



Total interactions on Facebook by Zemmour, Macron and Le Pen



Interaction rate of each of the three candidates on Facebook



Facebook video views for each of the three candidates



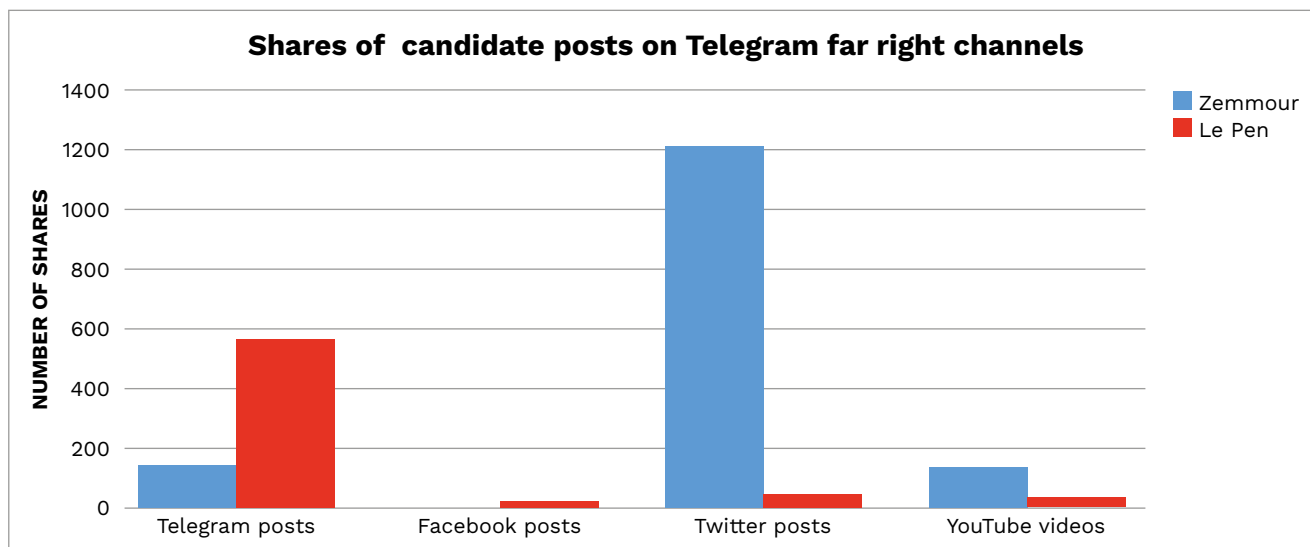
Facebook ad Reconquete

or organisation to make it appear as though it originates from, and is supported by, grassroots participants.<sup>29</sup> *Le Monde* analysed thousands of tweets between 1 October and 30 November 2021 and revealed how massive retweets and coordination allowed a small group of Twitter users to boost Zemmour-related tweets to be more visible and rank higher by the Twitter algorithm. For example, a very small number of Twitter accounts posted thousands of posts within the same day with the hashtag *LesFemmesAvecZemmour* (Women with Zemmour) to get it trending on the main twitter page.<sup>30</sup> The trending hashtags are often linked to the various websites set up by Zemmour’s affiliates and encourage signing up, which allows Reconquête to then contact them for financial support or encourage them to become a member of the political party. Through this technique, Zemmour’s team have managed to create a much larger online following than if it had been organically grown.

## TELEGRAM

Zemmour’s dominance on social media is especially evident on Telegram. Telegram is an instant messaging service that is known for its ability to secure messages and encrypt them during transit. It is also an easy way to coordinate with a large numbers of users, and it has become increasingly popular among the far right and conspiracy theorists.

By 15 March 2022, Zemmour had accrued 32,788 subscribers on his official channel (since



Comparison of how successful Le Pen and Zemmour are on Telegram in getting different types of content shared on far-right channels.

January 2021). Part of his popularity could be explained by the fact that far-right supporters had often already moved to Telegram after being deplatformed from more mainstream platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. However, Le Pen has only reached 5,993 subscribers (since January 2021). Meanwhile Macron has 19,815 followers since August 2016. Zemmour has also shared more multimedia on his channel than Macron and Le Pen. He has over 500 photos compared to 300 for Le Pen and 27 for Macron.

This report examined Telegram messages from a sample of 100 French far-right Telegram channels between the 1 January 2021 to 10 March 2022. The analysis showed Le Pen and Zemmour were both significantly more active on Telegram compared to Macron. Unsurprisingly, due to Macron not being part of a far-right party, Macron had almost no reach on the Telegram channels examined.

Le Pen and Zemmour have both been successful in using Telegram to bolster their other social media platforms. Both re-use their content from Twitter, Facebook and Youtube by sharing it on their Telegram channel. Despite Zemmour having more subscribers, Le Pen was more successful in getting her Telegram posts shared in these far-right channels, and slightly better at getting her Facebook posts shared. On the other hand, Zemmour was much more effective in getting his tweets and YouTube videos shared on these channels.

## SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS

Social media allows for activists and supporters to more easily consume material from ideologically disparate groups and move between them with less friction. In this way it opens up a radicalisation pathway from less extreme to more radical groups. Zemmour’s supporters come from a spectrum of right to far-right ideologies, and his website links to all ten of his social media profiles. This has the potential to bring, for example, a supporter from Facebook to join his Telegram group and come into contact with more extreme elements of the far right.

Looking at Eric Zemmour’s social media activity over the past 15 months, his achievement in establishing himself online and keeping media focus on him cannot be understated. On Youtube, Zemmour has been especially successful in attracting views compared to his more established competitors. This was helped by his reach on other platforms such as Telegram where he reposts content. He has also focused on speaking – or getting his affiliates to speak – to influencers on the platform. Having prominent Youtubers with their own large following mention Zemmour has helped expand his reach. Youtube collaborations and guest speakers are also a proven way to grow channels<sup>31</sup> and no candidate has used this as effectively as Zemmour in these elections.

Zemmour’s success on Facebook can be summarised to his effective use of political ads that did not break the French electoral code and the high interaction rate he’s developed

with his followers. He has spent much more on Facebook ads than Le Pen. The volume of posts, especially video content, has helped him reach a wider audience. However, unlike Youtube, he did not reach Macron or Le Pen's level of followers, who have much more established Facebook profiles.

Telegram is another platform where he has dominated, having more followers than his opponents' channels. Le Pen was slightly more successful in sharing Facebook posts on the far-right channels examined – that may be due to having more content on Facebook to share. Zemmour's Twitter and Youtube content did much better amongst far-right channels on Telegram than Le Pen. This could be due to how controversial Zemmour remains, even in far-right circles, and how the chances of his less established campaign generate a lot of discussion in far-right circles.

## THE ZEMMOURISATION OF THE MEDIA

The fact that Zemmour has become a serious contender in the French elections could fragment the far right further, as sympathetic voters now have to decide between two far right options. Many of his supporters on the right believe that while Zemmour cannot win the election or get to the second round, he will remain a unifying point from the republican right to the extreme far right.

However, Zemmour has already achieved success by dominating the media and political space in run-up to the election, from news networks dissecting his every action to trending repeatedly on social media platforms. More than 300 journalists signed an open letter at the end of October 2021<sup>32</sup> denouncing news organisations amplifying the voice of public figures spreading hate. “We consider there is no debating people pushing out fascist, racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic and revisionist ideas, instead we believe they should be challenged or disregarded,” the letter stated. France's largest union of journalists, the SNJ, also condemned the “Zemmourisation” of the Presidential campaign. Their press release called for Zemmour and his positions to be more critically examined.<sup>33</sup> Acrimed, a French media observatory, stated that the state of the media in covering Zemmour is “a concrete materialisation of 30 years of banalising the far right in the mainstream media”.<sup>34</sup> It points out the excessive media coverage for Zemmour began months before he formalised his decision to run.

While France has electoral rules to ensure networks cover candidates to an equal extent, the barrage of coverage Zemmour received before he officially announced his candidacy did not officially count. Arret sur Images, a website that examines the media critically, showed that mainstream networks also bended the rules once Zemmour was a candidate by giving him airtime during the day, while cramming less popular candidates during the night. They found that over four nights, the Green's candidate Yannick Jadot's speech was replayed 31 times.<sup>35</sup>

An Ipsos-Sopra Steria survey in February 2022 showed the economy, health and the environment were the top three concerns for the French people. However, immigration – which comes in fourth – remained a central theme during election season and a favourite topic of Zemmour.<sup>36</sup> His overexposure also allowed him to set the issues dominating the run-up to the election. Originally solely a far-

right theory, the Great Replacement is now discussed in mainstream public debates and other candidates have also discussed the issue. Les Républicains, France's main right-wing party, candidate Valérie Pécresse drew criticism after mentioning the conspiracy theory in a large campaign event.<sup>37</sup> Members of her party were quick to clarify that there was no Great Replacement in which immigrants were

# FAR-RIGHT ELECTORAL SUCCESS IN FRANCE

The French election system relies on two voting rounds that take place every five years. All candidates must secure 500 signatures from elected officials such as mayors to secure a spot on the ballot. Zemmour struggled to do so and obtained the required signatures only days before the 4 March deadline. In the first round, any candidate can be voted for. If there is no absolute majority, there is a second round of voting between the two candidates with the most votes. In the history of France, there has never been only one round of voting.

After the Vichy regime, which collaborated closely with Nazi Germany, the far right was seen as politically dead, the remnant dregs left on the outskirts of intellectual circles. Eighty years later, the political and media debate has shifted to such a degree that right wing magazines such as *Valeur Actuelles* and Fox-type channels like *CNews* are discussing the Great Replacement theory. Zemmour's focus has been on the supposed French decline, and the chief culprit he has found for his stated loss of French identity is Islam. He regularly issues Islamophobic statements such as: "I believe the headscarf is a political sign, a sign of colonisation."<sup>44</sup>

His statements are often more extreme than Le Pen's long-standing and popular far-right party. Le Pen has worked for years to bring the *Rassemblement National* into the mainstream, dropping the more extreme edges of her policies, announcing she doesn't believe in a clash of religion and kicking the founder of her party and father Jean-Marie Le Pen from the party for his overt antisemitism in 2015. Then called the *Front National* (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen had helped unify the far

right after years of division and had helped the party achieve its first electoral win in the town of Dreux, followed by successes in the 1984 European elections. Since Marine Le Pen became leader of the FN in 2011, the party has won several municipalities and achieved 25% of the vote in the 2014 European elections. By the 2015 regional elections it had achieved first place with nearly 28% of the vote. During the 2012 Presidential elections Le Pen came in third, and in the 2017 Presidential election she reached the second round.

However, despite Le Pen's success in leading the party, RN has lost votes in recent years. There was a general low turnout in France's municipal elections in 2021. A record two-thirds of voters did not vote in regional and departmental elections.<sup>45</sup> Le Pen's party was unable to win a single region. This has impacted predictions of the party's success in the 2022 elections, and several RN officials joined Zemmour's party, believing he had a better chance of winning. Jérôme Rivière, one of Le Pen's MEPs who joined Zemmour, told *Euronews*: "I realised that in fact, [despite] the weight of Marine Le Pen's name... too much to overcome the bad reputation that the party has," said Rivière, who previously led the party's European parliamentary group.<sup>46</sup> Even Marion Marechal, Le Pen's niece, joined Zemmour's party over the RN.

changing the demographics of Europe, trying to once again separate the right-wing party from the far right.

Zemmour's topics of choice, such as Islam and the French identity, are also highly featured on news networks because his controversial statements are easily repackaged online, generating buzz for the networks' social media channels. The interactions between the media space and the online social media space are not clearly delineated, but there is no doubt each influences the other. Each televised debate and interview with Zemmour is shared by his team on his different online profiles, with highlights and compilations of his best, most controversial moments. Meanwhile, his high number of followers on online platforms and his ability to go viral make him a tempting guest for television.

## BACKFIRING TACTICS

However, while Zemmour was setting the agenda and getting through to the second round of the elections was becoming a real possibility, his strategy worked against him when the war in Ukraine broke out. First, Zemmour had publicly said Vladimir Putin would not invade Ukraine,<sup>38</sup> and has written positively about Russia in the past. Furthermore, he did not condemn the Russian attack immediately and said he did not want Ukrainian refugees to reach France (even Le Pen welcomed them in the country) before U-turning on his position.

More importantly, the war has partly shifted the conversation away from Zemmour's usual talking points and he is struggling to keep up, as public opinion differs sharply from his own on issues such as Ukrainian refugees. His constant refrain about the Great Replacement is also being challenged by the current situation where the immigrants are not brown and from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>39</sup> He has attempted to redirect the national conversation to his narratives by announcing ideas such as a "remigration ministry" to send back "foreign delinquents and criminals".<sup>40</sup>

Zemmour, a man of immigrant and Jewish background, may seem like an odd rallying point for the far right given the prejudices common among this political grouping. In fact, certain segments of the far right, on fringe networks such as Parler, do remain sceptical of the candidate and suspicious of his Jewish and North African heritage.<sup>41</sup> Others are more pragmatic, with French writer and Holocaust



"I am the only candidate that unites the right. Right-wing voters have been waiting for this for the last 30 years".

denier Hervé Ryssen writing on his Telegram channel: "Petain put his trust in an ex-Jew to write his speeches... Try to live in reality rather than dream about coup d'états that will not occur. We don't have time to lose, we need to stop ... the migration invasion, that's the first goal. After that, anything can happen."<sup>42</sup> However, another supporter, the white supremacist Daniel Conversano, admits on YouTube that he would "prefer for Marine Le Pen to have Eric Zemmour's talent, because Marine Le Pen is really French."<sup>43</sup>

Whatever the results of the French election, Zemmour is likely to remain a fixture within the French political scene and in far-right circles. His ability to lead the agenda and set the election debates was helped by his success in using various social media tools. Despite the electoral code and social media company policies, Zemmour managed to instrumentalise the platforms to increase his reach. Whatever happens during the elections, his campaign has increased the size of his audience and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas.

## Endnotes

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