Media content and support for the radical right
The *Front National* in France

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Caterina Froio[*] & **Emiliano Grossman**
Sciences Po, Centre d'études européennes et de politique comparée, Paris

Abstract

Do the media contribute to the success of radical-right populist parties (RRPPs)? Although scholars have looked at the impact of the media on support for the Front National (now *Rassemblement National*, RN), they have only focused on the extent to which the structure of the French media system, the logics of news production and specific features of the party – notably the style of its leader- have fostered its success. Research on how media content impacts support for the RN is still in its infancy. To address this gap, the paper contends that media content provides RRPPs with favorable discursive opportunities, setting a public agenda highly favourable to these parties and their ideas. More precisely, we posit that news volume, issue focus and tone impact support for the RN. The study relies on a novel combined dataset measuring the monthly popularity of the RN, the visibility of the party, of immigration issues, and the tone of news coverage in the daily quality press over thirty-three years (1984-2017). The findings suggest that news content expands discursive opportunities for the radical right. We demonstrate that the volume and tone of the news covering the RN foster support for the party. Yet, we find no evidence that news tone on immigration systemically favour the RN. While the results owe much to the French context, the conclusions draw broader implications as to the role of political communication dynamics in the surge of radical-right populist parties in contemporary democracies.

Keywords: Radical right, media, newspapers, immigration, Front National

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[*] Corresponding author at caterina.froio[]sciencespo.fr.

Introduction

The *Rassemblement National* (RN, formerly *Front National*) [1] is among the eldest and most successful radical right populist parties (RRPPs) in Europe. Born in 1972 the party ultimately gained parliamentary representation and at the last presidential elections in 2017 it was supported by more than 20% of voters. When scholars discuss the upsurge of the RN, they often examine how the media relate to the support for the party (Ellinas 2010; Tevanian and Tissot 2010; Birenbaum and Villa 2003; Taguieff 2002; Maler and Salingue 2015). However, these studies have focused primarily on the extent to which the structure of the French media system, the logics of news production, and specific features of the party – notably the style of its leader- have fostered its success. Less attention has been paid to media content to shed light on the complex relation between the media and support for the RN. This paper sets out to fill that void.

Scholars recognize that the media play a crucial role in explaining the support for the radical right (Mudde 2007, 253; de Jonge 2018). In this article, we look at the content of the quality press in France to explain the support for the RN over time. We account for the volume, issue focus, and tone of media coverage of the RN to explain its support. Our theory builds on existing research on the media, political parties and the radical right. We argue that news content may open discursive opportunities for the radical right setting a public agenda highly favourable to these parties and their ideas (Koopmans and Muis 2009; Ellinas 2010, 2018; Thesen 2018). More precisely, by increasing the visibility of immigration-related stories that are central for the RN (Swyngedouw and Ivaldi 2001) media may provide the party with a favourable setting. In addition, we expect that negative tone of news content, echoing the negative tone of radical right parties' campaigns (Aalberg et al. 2017; Nai 2018) shall increase support for the RN.

To test these assumptions, we use a novel combined dataset measuring the monthly popularity of the RN, the visibility of the party, of immigration issues, and the tone of news coverage in daily quality papers. By combining existing data, the analyses cover for the first time thirty-three years of life of the RN: since its first electoral *exploit* in 1984 to the last presidential election in 2017. Based on the results of a time series regression analysis, we conclude that media content fuels support for the radical right. We do find that the volume and tone of the news covering the RN affect support for the party positively. Yet, we find no evidence that news tone on immigration systemically favours the RN.

The article proceeds as follows. As radical right populism is a much-debated concept, we begin by discussing how the concept is used in this paper to study the RN and its development in the French political system. Second, we describe the conditions under which media content is likely to foster support for the RN. Third, we present the data and methods of the study. Fourth, we analyze whether volume, issues and tone of media coverage have fostered support for the RN since the 80s. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of the findings to improve our understanding on the role of the media in the success of the radical right in France and beyond.

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[1] For the sake of clarity, we will systematically use the current name and its acronym, Rassemblement national (RN), to refer to the party, even when referring to the party before its recent rebranding.

The *Rassemblement National* as a radical right party

In recent years, an increasing number of researchers agreed that the French *Rassemblement National* can best be defined as a radical right populist party (Mudde 2007; Mayer 2009; Swyngedouw and Ivaldi 2001; Rooduijn 2015). In this paper, we follow these authors and define the RN as a radical right populist party, i.e. a political party whose core ideological features are nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007, 11–31). Although the RN is not a single-issue party, this definition as radical right implies that the party has one core issue: nativism. Since its early days, nativist rhetoric became the trademark of the party. The RN exhibits a classic nativist rhetoric around the ethnocentric principle of the '*Preference Nationale*' (Own [*French*] people first). Overtime, it has managed to build ownership on immigration and issues related to integration (see Meguid 2005, 2008). More recently, Islam acquired a prominent role in the nativist discourse of the RN, especially following the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice (see Froio 2018; Frigoli and Ivaldi 2017; Bar On 2018). This means that voters associate the party with immigration and integration issues (Mayer 2002, 2013) or believe that the RN is more competent in handling them (Petrocik 1996). We thus consider immigration as a core issue for the RN and for its support.

The RN is today the eldest radical right party in Europe and has experienced many organizational and electoral developments epitomized by its recent leadership and name changes. Born from the extreme right movement *Ordre Nouveau* (New Order) in 1972 and first called Front National, it elected Jean Marie Le Pen as its first president on October 5th, 1979. The cantonal elections of March 1982 marked the first breakthrough of the RN at the local level but its first national appearance dates from June 1984, when it gathered 10.9 per cent of the votes at the European parliamentary elections gaining ten seats. Over more than 40 years of life, the RN experienced dramatic changes in its electoral fortunes, passing from 0.75 per cent of votes in the 1974 presidential elections to 21.30 percent in 2017. The party increased its electoral support over the last decades with an average 16 per cent of the national vote cast in the successive presidential elections even if it had members in the national parliament only in four occasions: 35 MPs in 1986[2], 1 in 1997, 2 in 2012, and 8 in 2017. In the first round of the 2002 presidential election, the RN reached its (first) electoral climax, obtaining 16.9 per cent of the total vote. This allowed its historical leader, Jean Marie Le Pen, to access the second round of the presidential election when he was defeated by the right-wing candidate Jacques Chirac. After 2002, the party underwent a period of internal distress that eventually led to the appointment of Marine Le Pen as the new president in January 2011 (Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015, 13–14). Replacing her Holocaust-denying father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen is believed to nourish the increasing acceptance of the RN as a 'normal' party (Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015; Campus 2017). Leadership change has been associated to a change of image of the RN that managed to progress among electorates that so far could not be counted among the party's constituency, notably women (Mayer 2013, 2015), homosexuals (Crépon 2015) and Jewish people (Fourquet 2015).

The party performed particularly well in the last presidential elections in May 2017. It qualified for the second round with an increase of about four million votes compared to 2012. The party also

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[2] Differently from other legislative elections, the elections in 1986 were held with party-list proportional representation system.

maintained its historical electoral strongholds in the Northern region of the Nord Pas de Calais-Picardie (+ 7.26% of the votes compared to 2012) and the Southeastern region Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (+1.14%). After the Lille Congress in March 2018, the party changed its name from Front National to *Rassemblement National*.[3] At the time of writing, it is the second party in the country and a credible contender for any upcoming national election. As the RN achieved national electoral relevance in 1984, this date is the starting point of the empirical analyses.

Does media content fuel support for the radical right?

Why should media content matter for the support for the radical right? There appears to be a growing consensus in the literature that the mediatization of politics fuels the support for radical-right populist parties (cf. Mazzoleni 2008; Ellinas 2018; Mudde 2013; Muis and Immerzeel 2017). Scholars emphasize that news content may offer strategic advantages to RRPPs, notably by expanding 'discursive opportunities' available for the radical right (Giugni et al. 2005; Koopmans and Muis 2009).

The underlying rationale is straightforward: in a context of increasingly mediatized politics, the media have become the central arena of political competition (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Esser 2013). In these circumstances, the radical right can profit from exaggerated media attention. This is a consequence of a "media logic" that dominates most media in contemporary democracies, leading to a type of reporting that some scholars called "media populism".[4] "Media populism" may also result from changes in the functioning and funding of the media industry (see Cagé 2018), and it primarily affects media content (Mazzoleni 2008). More precisely, it becomes particularly important in media which share with the radical right three discursive traits: personalization, emotionalization and anti-establishment attitude (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Mazzoleni 2008). Mediatization and media logic may have encouraged personalization of politics and, more generally, the increasingly sensationalist coverage of politics. There may thus be a "convergence of goals" between media and populism (Mazzoleni 2008, 63). RRPPs are obviously not the only parties adopting populist strategies, but they are particularly fit to benefit from media populism. They usually have leaders with a strong personality and a sensationalist approach to politics. They cherish attacks on the quality media, on elites, on minorities etc. (Mazzoleni 2003) While tabloids will usually value the commercial potential of this type of attacks, quality media may also pay attention to it – be it to criticize those attacks. Put differently quality media may thus indirectly facilitate the circulation of RRPPs discourse and contribute to their success.

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[3] Although electorally successful, the RN has suffered from factionalism and organizational schisms. After a minor split in 1973 by Emmannuel Allot (known as François Brigneaud), in January 1999, the General Delegate of the party (Bruno Mégret) left the Front with a group of top-level party officers and grassroots members. Mégret created the *Mouvement National* (MN) subsequently renamed *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR) that never gained electoral relevance in the French party system (Ivaldi 2003). More recently, internal tensions emerged in the FN between the partisans of Jean Marie Le Pen's 'hard' traditional line (headed by Marion Le Pen) and those pushing for distancing the party from the father's brand of politics (Marine Le Pen and Florian Philippot). Marion Le Pen resigned after the second round of the 2017 presidential elections officially for personal reasons.

[4] Krämer lists several characteristic elements: "the construction and favoritism of in-groups, hostility toward, and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy, reliance on charisma and (group-related) commonsense, and appeal to moral sentiments" (Krämer 2014, 48).

The concept of discursive opportunities is helpful to illustrate how this may happen. Originally coined by scholars on new social movements (see Koopmans and Olzak 2004), the concept refers to "the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message's chance of success in the public sphere" (Koopmans and Muis 2009, 648). In a recent article, Thesen (2018) shows that media content is one of the factors that will determine whether discursive opportunities are favorable (or not) to the radical right. He suggests that the media shall not be considered "as a proxy of discursive opportunities per se but as an element of the public discourse that facilitates a favorable discursive opportunity structure" (Thesen 2018:81). We follow this interpretation and examine whether media content, news volume and the tone of the news make the RN and its core ideas more resonant and credible among broader audiences (Giugni et al. 2005; Koopmans and Muis 2009). Currently, various explanations exist to account for whether and how news content may be beneficial to RRPs' support.

To begin with researchers highlight the importance of the coverage of political parties themselves for their support (see, e.g. Sheets, Bos, and Boomgaarden 2015; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). When all parties (including radical right ones) become more visible in the media, they become more impressed in voters' minds and consequently have a higher chance of being considered as a vote option when election time comes. In this sense, party visibility in the media may help voters to understand and cope with a complex political environment by reducing information costs simplifying voting decisions (Downs 1957; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Accordingly, we expect that the visibility of the radical right in the media (hereafter referred to as the volume of the news or media attention) is related to the support for the party over time. The focus on volume assumes that even "negative coverage cannot be all bad", as Esser and colleagues have argued (2017, 366). We thus advance the following hypothesis:

H1. Higher media attention to a radical right party increases the support for the party.

Second, scholars emphasize the importance of media coverage of specific issues owned by political parties or candidates (Iyengar et Kinder 1987; Petrocik 1996). In the case of radical right parties, voters associate them, primarily, with immigration (Walgrave and De Swert 2004, 481–83; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007). The French RN is no exception: while it is certainly not a "single-issue" party (Mitra 1988), surveys regularly confirm that immigration is still strongly associated with it by both sympathizers and opponents. Generally speaking, the visibility of immigration-related issues in the media, in combination with the ownership of the issue by the radical right, should foster support for these parties over time. To put it bluntly, we assume that media coverage of issues associated with or championed by the radical right should increase support for this type of party. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Higher media attention to immigration increases the support for the radical right.

Third, recent investigations consider the importance of the tone of the news. Moving beyond the ideas that "all publicity is good publicity", scholars suggest that news tone can provide strategic (dis)advantages to political actors (Entman 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Positive tone of coverage of the RN is likely to affect support positively, as it contributes to consolidating the

credibility of the party as a political contender. We assume that the tone of coverage of immigration also matters: negative coverage of immigration is likely to favor the owner of this issue, i.e. the radical right. When immigration is perceived as a source of problems, government parties will be blamed for their incapacity to deal with it (Rooduijn 2013). This should, in turn, increase support for the radical right. Thus, our hypotheses are the following:

H3a. Positive tone of RRPPs coverage increases support for the party
H3b. Negative tone on immigration in the media increases the support for the party

In sum, we believe it is important to examine how media content matters for the support for the radical right and investigate whether news volume, issues and tone, as laid down in the quality press, has opened discursive opportunities, fostering support for the RN over time.

Data and methods

To test these hypotheses on the impact of media content on support for the radical right, we analysed how news volume, issues and tone in the quality press relate to the support for the RN. This combined dataset covers the period between 1984 and 2017 because the party surged and developed during this period over six presidential elections.


Support for the Rassemblement national

The dependent variable of this study is support for the RN. *RN support* is measured using an indicator of positive popularity of the party, i.e. the share of French voters having a positive opinion of the RN from monthly opinion surveys by Kantar-TNS (1984-2017). Although popularity does not necessarily translate into electoral support, we decided to use it for three main reasons. First, to our understanding popularity is an indicator of the *political* rather than *electoral* support for the radical right (Mudde 2007). Though admittedly less accurate than propensity to vote or actual votes for a party, positive popularity captures citizens' support or opposition for the RN, hence providing insights into general visions of the party in French society. In other words, we use positive popularity to measure support because we consider that the rise of the radical right involves more than increasing vote shares of a given party. It has also to do with the "pervasiveness" of these parties' ideas among broader audiences than their voters (Rooduijn 2014, 726). Furthermore, as we have this data on monthly basis, this also allows for a much more fine-grained analysis than votes. Second, we use positive opinions (and not negative ones), as we are interested in the consequences of media content for the attractiveness the party exercises over citizens. Theoretically, rising opposition to the party could go along with rising attractiveness, something we did not want to focus on for the purpose of this paper. Positive popularity was operationalized by the following question: "Do you have a good opinion of the RN?". Third, the French electoral system, a two-round majority system, tends to favor strategic voting, making vote intentions a much more volatile indicator[5]. Our

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[5] On the specific calculus of this type of electoral system, see, for instance, Indridason (2008).

dependent variable is thus the share of positive opinions on the RN per month. It is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Support for the Rassemblement National (1984-2017).
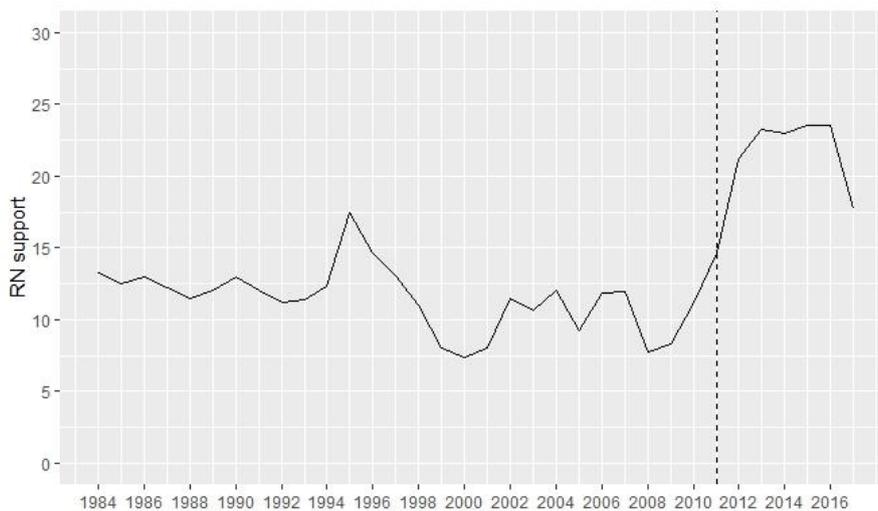
Source: Kantar-TRS Sofres. The dotted vertical line marks the arrival of Marine Le Pen to the party presidency. The figure represents the percentage of positive opinions on the RN.

The support for the RN features major variations over time. The party reaches a first peak of support following the 1995 presidential election, before experiencing a lasting fall in support. Starting in 2010 there is a steady increase in the share of voters having a positive opinion of the RN. This begins *before* the appointment of Marine Le Pen in 2011 and declines abruptly before the 2017 presidential elections.
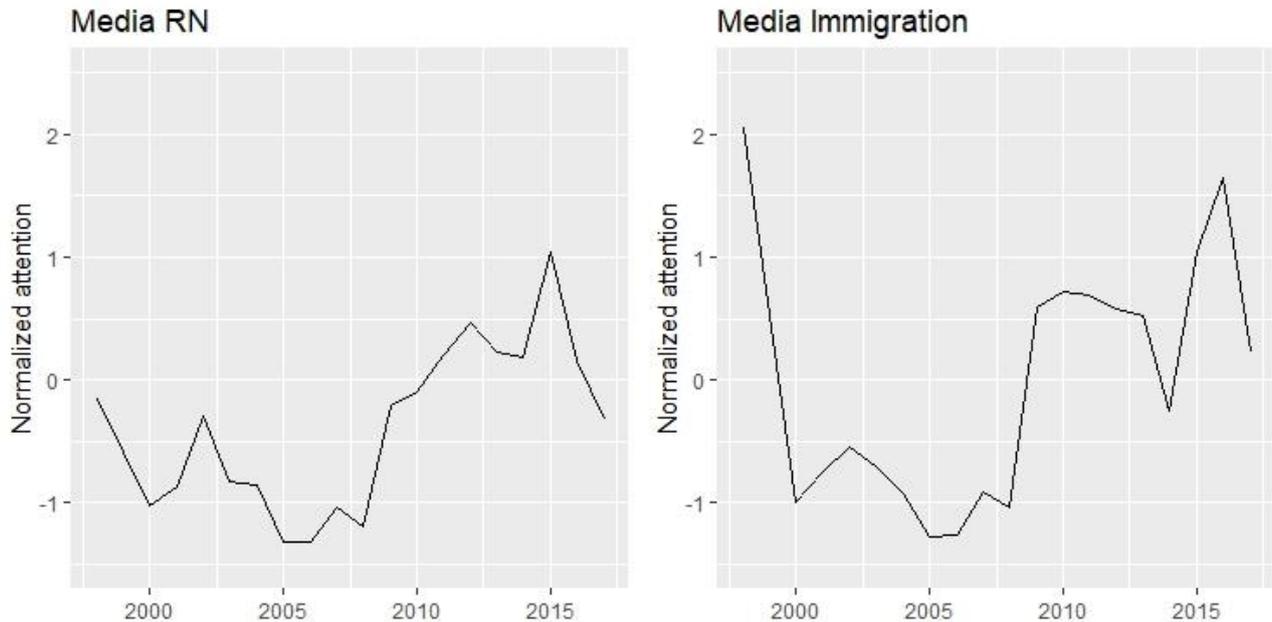
Measuring media content

To test our hypotheses, we measured various independent variables capturing the volume, issue focus and tone of media content. Among the various media outlets, we decided to focus on the quality press: *Le Monde, Le Figaro* and *Le Parisien*. Although the three newspapers are just one type of media outlet in which the coverage of the radical right can be observed, we decided to use them for two main reasons.

First, while daily newspapers circulation has declined in established democracies mostly to the benefit of new media, they still serve as major channel for public debates and act as core agenda-setters (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008; Vliegenthart et al. 2016). Compared to other media outlets, such as online and social media, TV and radio news, daily quality newspapers have been shown to cover politics in greater detail (see Trenz 2004). This is particularly relevant when observing the relationship between media content and discursive opportunities for collective actors (Koopmans and Statham 2010). For these reasons we decided to select articles from daily quality papers and we do not consider tabloids (that however do not exist in France). Second, in terms of diffusion *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* are respectively the first and second most read quality papers in France. *Le Parisien* comes fifth after the sport paper *L'Equipe,* and the economic daily *Les Echos* (Lardeau 2019; Kelly, Mazzoleni, and McQuail 2004). Finally, the three quality papers have different editorial lines and geographical focus. In fact, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* are national daily newspapers with a centre-left and a centre-right editorial line respectively. *Le Parisien* is a daily newspaper with

a centrist editorial line, covering national and international news with a specialization on local news on Paris and its suburbs. Therefore, although limited to three media outlets, our measure of media content about the RN is a reliable indicator of the visibility of the party, the issues it owns, and the tone associated to both in public debates. At this stage, we also highlight that while we use print media as data source, we are primarily interested in the amount of content dedicated to the RN, immigration and news tone rather than to the way in which journalists address these themes or the way in which different quality media address them. We derive several independent variables from the media data we gathered.

The first independent variable measures the volume of the media content referring to the RN (*Media RN*). This is operationalized as the number of articles mentioning the words "Front National" and/or "Rassemblement National" and/or "Marine Le Pen" and/or "Jean Marie Le Pen" per month. We then aggregated the figures for each newspaper into a single indicator. To do this we normalized the figures for each newspaper and weighted them equally, since we did not have any strong assumption regarding each outlet. We consider that this measure thus covers an important variety of media coverage of both the RN and Immigration. The variable *Media immig* captures the volume of the media content referring to immigration. It was constructed using the same method as *Media RN*, based on the keywords "Immigration" and/or "Migrant" and/or "Refugiés". Figure 2 shows the volume of articles covering the RN and immigration overtime.

Figure 2. News on the Rassemblement National and immigration in the quality press (1984-2017)

Source: Le Monde/Le Figaro/Le Parisien.

The third and fourth independent variables measure the tone of media content referring to the RN and to immigration respectively. Tone is measured using an independent dictionary of positive and negative words. Here we use a standard so-called "bag-of-words" approach, i.e. not checking for order of words or the association of positive of negative words with the particular term of interest.

This technique has the great advantage of being easily replicable and has been used successfully in existing studies (e.g. Young and Soroka 2012; Monroe and Schrodt 2008). The tone indicator is the sum of positive words minus the sum of negative words in each article. In this way, we are not able to tell if immigration was reported positively or negatively, but whether immigration was covered predominantly in a positive or negative way. To this end we use the FEEL dictionary (Abdaoui et al. 2017), a very rich French dictionary adapted and translated from the NRC Sentiment Lexicon (Mohammad and Turney 2013). We calculate monthly averages per journal. As before, we are agnostic as to the relative weight of each journal and thus simply take the average of the three measures to build our two indicators of tone. *Media RN tone* measures the tone of articles mentioning the RN. *Media Imm. Tone* measures the tone of articles mentioning migration-related issues. Articles are identified using the same search strategies as the volume-related measures described above.

Context

The impact of media content on RRPPs support does not happen in a vacuum. The basic premise is that exogenous and endogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for radical right support. To account for this, we control for broader features at the contextual level that are traditionally considered when assessing the drivers of RRPs' support (Mudde 2007, 232–55). Given our focus on a single country, we cannot account for the effects of differences between political systems. Yet, beyond formal institutional variance, other features are also related to the configurations in the party system and to broader societal and endogenous party developments (Van der Brug, et al. 2005; Van Spanje 2010). Our general argument is that the potential for the RN to profit of media content will be dependent on how well (or badly) the RN locates itself in this context.

We include in the models a control for the visibility of immigration in the party manifesto of the Prime Minister's party (*PM party immig*). The literature suggests that the dynamics between parties within the system, notably between governing and challenger parties, create or inhibit opportunities for support for the radical right (Mudde 2007, 237; Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2005, 546). As immigration is an issue "owned" by the radical right, we expect the visibility of immigration in the programs of the party heading the executive to influence support for the radical right (for a discussion, see Van Spanje 2010; Castelli Gattinara 2016, 2018). We use manifesto data from the *Comparative Agendas Project*, rather than from CMP (now MARPOR), as the former only looks at salience, rather than directionality, which substantially enhances the reliability and the replicability of the coding process (Baumgartner et al. 2019). Additionally, CMP data do not have an ad hoc category for immigration like CAP data. Our models also control for levels of *unemployment*, using the official indicator of the French national statistical institute INSEE. Although the literature disagrees on whether economic conditions in general influence support for the radical right, scholars found a positive relationship between levels of unemployment and support for the radical right (e.g. Anderson 1996; Arzheimer 2009). Accordingly, we expect that increasing levels of unemployment profit to the radical right.

While we will analyze the *visibility* of immigration in the news and in the programs of the governing party, previous work on radical right support underlined the importance of the *number of migrants*. Whether and how the number of migrants, and more recently of asylum seekers, in a country fosters

support for the radical right is still a matter of debate. On the one hand, ethnic competition theories suggest that higher numbers of migrants shall foster radical right support. On the other, contact theories suggest that it is not the number of migrants that matters but levels of exposure to migration and diversity (see for a discussion Amengay and Stockemer 2018; Lubbers, Gijsberts, et Scheepers 2002). As there is no agreement in the literature and immigration is at the core of radical right campaigns, we decided to control both for the *migration balance* and for the number of *asylum seekers*. Figures for both variables are taken from Eurostat. In the case of the RN, leadership change is believed to have increased the appeal of the party (Mayer 2013; Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015; Campus 2017). Therefore, we also include a control variable (*Marine Le Pen*) that is coded 1 for the period when Marine Le Pen is the leader (starting from January 16, 2011) and 0 otherwise.

We run regression models with all control variables included. Boomgarden and Vliegenthart (2007) point to the problems of stationarity of variables in this context and argue in favor of the Box-Jenkins method, running ARIMAs for each covariant. We settle for a simpler solution: we deseasonalize the dependent variable, after estimating autocorrelation and autocovariance functions (see the corresponding ACF plot in the appendix). Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests of residuals confirm that this procedure is sufficient to avoid unit root. We add versions of the regressions used in the next section with robust standard errors (to be added). This requires that all variables have stationary means and variances.

Results

The formal test of the hypotheses is presented in Table 1 below. It shows the effects of media content on the support for the RN, while controlling for contextual determinants.

Table 1. Influence of media content on support for the Rassemblement National (1984-2017).

| | DV: RN_support | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Media RNt-1		0.254***	0.206**
		(0.071)	(0.088)
Media imm.t-1		0.049*	0.166***
		(0.029)	(0.042)
Media RN tonet-1		0.140**	0.171**
		(0.061)	(0.087)
Media Imm. tone$_{t-1}$		0.061	-0.232*
		(0.095)	(0.131)
RN media:RN media tone			-0.003
			(0.023)
Imm. med.:Imm. med. tone			0.041***
			(0.011)
Controls			
PM party immig.	-0.356***	-0.309***	-0.382***
	(0.098)	(0.097)	(0.098)
Unemployment$_{t-1}$	0.598***	0.728***	0.752***
	(0.175)	(0.176)	(0.177)
Mig. Balance$_{t-12}$	-0.003	0.002	0.005
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Asylum$_{t-12}$	-0.00004***	-0.00002*	-0.00002
	(0.00001)	(0.00001)	(0.00001)
Marine Le Pen	10.700***	10.176***	10.055***
	(0.723)	(0.711)	(0.699)
Constant	7.264***	4.737***	4.246**
	(1.684)	(1.734)	(1.734)
Observations	382	376	376
R^2	0.721	0.745	0.755
Adjusted R^2	0.717	0.739	0.748
Residual Std. Error	2.668 (df = 376)	2.558 (df = 366)	2.513 (df = 364)
F Statistic	194.150*** (df = 5; 376)	118.852*** (df = 9; 366)	102.162*** (df = 11; 364)
Ljung-Box Test			
ADF Test			
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

We start with an "empty" model (model 1) including only the control variables, explaining support for the RN. The Box-Ljung statistic confirms the absence of correlation among the residuals. The

value of the Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test, moreover, suggests that there is no unit-root for the transformed variable. Concerning the covariants, we find that increasing levels of unemployment favor support for the RN. The results point at a very weak effect of the number of migrants on the support for the party. In fact, migration balance does not affect support for the RN and the effect of the number of asylum seekers disappears in the final model. Taken together these results confirm that the relation between immigration and support for the radical right is more complicated than what posited by "ethnic competition theories" (see before). More interestingly, government party attention to immigration appears to be detrimental to the radical right. When salience of immigration in the program of the prime minister's party increases this negatively affects support for the RN. Again, the effect is not very strong: a one-percent increase in attention in the party platform diminishes support for the RN by .26 per cent. The arrival of Marine Le Pen at the head of the RN has a very sizable effect on party support, confirming visual evidence from Figure1 and other findings on party leadership effects (see Campus 2017). This at least partially confirms existing literature on far-right success in liberal democracies (see Mudde 2016).

Model 2 introduces the media content variables. Media attention significantly affects support for the RN: the higher the coverage of the RN in quality press, the higher its support (B=0.254; p<0.01). A standard deviation increase in media attention corresponds to approximately three additional articles per month in the quality press. It also turns out that media attention to immigration issues has a small but significant effect on support for the RN. This corresponds to an increasing number of articles in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, respectively eight and four. The tone of those articles has an autonomous and counterintuitive effect. In fact, a positive tone on the RN in the news further increases support for the party, independently of the volume of attention. Differently, the tone of the news on immigration does not have an effect, confirming classical priming assumptions as shown by Boomgarden and Vliegenthart (2007) or, recently, by Thesen (2018).

In model 3, we introduce interaction terms to better understand the impact of media content on support for the RN. We interact each volume and tone indicator. Media attention to the RN and the tone of news coverage continue to have an independent impact comparable in size to those observed in Model 2. Their interaction does not add any explanatory value to the model. The opposite is true for the interaction between the amount of attention to immigration and the tone of this coverage. Once we introduce the interaction, the effect of attention becomes a lot stronger, while the effect of tone becomes strongly negative. This means that articles that talk positively about migration, e.g. those concerning the successful integration of migrants and their contribution to French society have a negative impact on RN support. This is rather intuitive: articles talking about the positive contribution of migration are dissonant with the nativist discourse of the RN and thus unfavorable to the party. Figure 3 shows the relationship between media attention and tone for migration. We use different colors to indicate the predominant tone in the news: Blu = positive tone, Green=negative tone and Red = very negative tone.

Figure 3 – Interaction of media content and support for the RN, attention to immigration and news tone
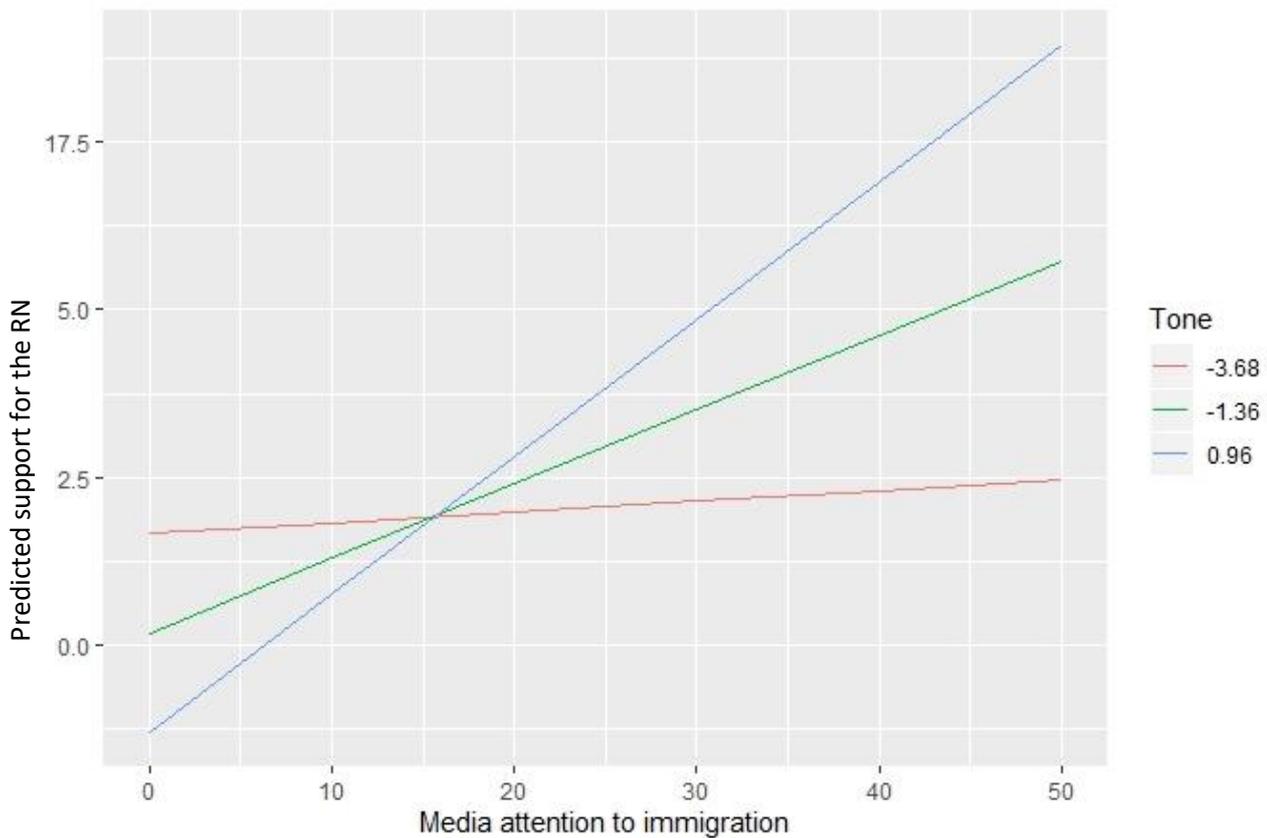
Note: colors indicate the predominant tone on the news. Blu = positive tone, Green=negative tone and Red = very negative tone.

The interactive effect is somewhat counterintuitive. In fact, articles that cover migration very negatively (red line) do not actually add much effect to support for the RN. To the contrary, articles which speak positively about migration (blu line) seem to favor the RN, the more articles on migration there are. While this is surprising, it is not devoid of interest. It means that too much dissonance – positive coverage of immigration – will tend to anger potential RN sympathizers and bring them closer to the party. In other words, it is possible that some citizens tend to support the RN when they are exposed to positive news of migrants in quality media. This is in line with existing research on media and echo chambers, suggesting that supporters of populist parties tend to distrust quality media coverage as they perceive it as biased against them (Schroeder 2018). In this context, some citizens may simply become distrustful and polarize their opinions, opposing the ways reality is portrayed by mainstream media outlets privileging alternative sources of information, notably online (Haller and Holt 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

While much has been written on the impact of the media on support for radical-right populist parties, less is known about the actual influence of media content. Mazzoleni has argued that "[a] full understanding of the populist phenomenon cannot be achieved without studying mass communication perspectives and media-related dynamics"(Mazzoleni 2003, 2). Mazzoleni therefore

speaks of "media populism" referring to specific features of media content resulting from changes in the organization and functioning of the media industry and news production that would provide resonance to radical right parties' messages. But how do media content relate to support for the radical right? Has support for radical-right populist parties something to do with the volume, focus and tone of the news?

To address these questions, the paper focused on media content related to one of the most successful radical right parties in Europe: the French *Rassemblement National*. Our theory builds on existing studies on the media, political parties and the radical right, suggesting that media content provides radical right parties with favorable discursive opportunities, making their ideas more pervasive in contemporary democracies. To specify these mechanisms, we put forward hypotheses on how the volume, content and tone of the news may make the message of the radical right more popular among all citizens, not only their supporters. By covering a period of thirty-three years, the results demonstrated that media content has to do with support for the radical right, but not as expected. In fact, we find that the increasing volume and positive tone of the news covering the RN foster support for the party. Yet, we find no evidence that news tone on immigration systemically favour the RN. While increasing visibility of immigration in the quality press increases support for the party, positive tone of immigration stories also fosters support for the party.

These are important results and are in line with Mazzoleni's intuition that news reporting has increasingly employed the coverage of the radical right and its owned issues in their content, fostering the success of RRPPs. Yet, the analyses also show that media attention to issues owned by these parties also relates to their support in an unexpected way. It turned out that once immigration becomes more salient in the news, more citizens are inclined to support the party that "owns" this issue even when media coverage on immigration is positive. In other words, media content may create favorable discursive opportunity for radical right parties by giving visibility to them and their owned issues, but also without adapting to RRPPs' negative tone on immigration. This is a core finding of the paper, hinting at polarization between mainstream and (potential) radical right voters in news consumption.

Starting from these findings, future studies may provide further insights on individual-level cognitive mechanisms, considering exposure to media content and support for the radical right and other political parties at the individual level. Even if our analyses are based on aggregate data, it might well be the case that support for the radical right has to do with individuals' selective exposure to media content. Adding data on individuals' media diets would help drawing conclusions about cognitive mechanisms bridging support for the radical right and media content.

It is also important to highlight that our findings only pertain to quality newspapers in one country. Future research shall investigate if similar conclusions can be drawn from other media outlets (notably TV, radio and the internet) and media types (notably tabloids) in other countries. Yet as scholars believe that daily quality papers report more in depth on political events and they also set the agenda for other media (see Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008), it is likely that other media outlets confirm our findings.

In sum, support for radical-right populist parties has its roots also in the way in which the media communicate about the radical right and its owned issues to the broader public. When discussing about the surge of the radical right scholars and pundits often refer to the increase electoral results

of these parties. Yet the rise of radical right populism involves broader dynamics than electoral and party politics. To understand the surge of the radical right in contemporary democracies the paper invites to think how the study of political communication dynamics can thus complement the realm of party politics.

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APPENDIX

Table A. Descriptive statistics of the main variables.

	mean	median	min	max	n
RN support	11.671	10.077	4.174	25.355	420

Unemployment	8.015	8	6	10.200	432
Asylum	49,028	47,380	17,405	99,330	421
Mig. Balance	66.690	69	29.504	112.141	432
Marine Le Pen	0.252	0	0	1	432
Media RN	1.730	0.753	-1.446	14	426
Media RN tone	-1.068	-0.025	-21	6	426
Media Imm.	5.449	1	-1.592	43	426
Media Imm. tone	-1.232	-0.333	-8.333	2.844	426
PM party immig.	2.311	2.140	0	5	394

Figure B. The ACF plot of RN support.

Decomposition of multiplicative time series