

Extreme swingers: explaining political preference change from far-left to far-right in Twitter users

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Extended Abstract

Traditionally, political competition in Western democracies has been predominantly structured along a single left-right axis. Especially in Western Europe, voters were traditionally capable of perceive coherent position on political left-right scales and act accordingly when choosing political preferences (Aldrich, Ley, and Schober 2013). More recently, however, political competition has been transformed by issues such as immigration, international integration, and trade. The effects of this transformation have been deemed not less consequential than traditional cleavages structuring politics (Hooghe and Marks 2018). In fact, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have shown that economic internationalization is linked to the decline of left-right competition in determining voters' preferences (Grossman and Sauger 2019). The question of what new dimensions of political competition might be structuring is then of the foremost importance for understanding the transformation of democracies and political dynamics. Interest in new dimensions of political tension also come among other important ones, linked to mistrust in institutions, illiberal politics, and populism (Mudde 2004).

In this study we set out to investigate what are the active dimensions of political competition affecting traditional left-right politics using social media data. We select as a case study the 2022 French Presidential Elections and expressions of political support uttered by Twitter users. The French presidential election presents some unique features. Being a presidential political system, voters are presented with the same candidates across the country. This allow us to exclude considerations for variations of stances of candidates within parties. Being a two-round election, this allow us to observe reconfiguration of preferences as all but two candidates disappear as options in the second round. France has been identified in the political literature as a country highly polarized around emerging lines of political tension, including attitudes towards elites and institutions (Institut Montaigne 2019), eroding traditional left-right politics. In the 2022 Presidential Elections, according to main polls, main contenders were largely regarded as aligned with all three: far-left, center or center-right, and far-right political ideologies. France is also a country where Twitter has a high degree of penetration in politics: it has been shown that more than 90% of politicians are active on Twitter, and that Twitter data allows to identify several dimensions of political tension in the platform, including a left-right dimension, but also dimensions that are key for posing questions about what forces might be structuring voters' preferences (Ramaciotti Morales, Cointet, and Muñoz Zolotoochin 2021).

We leverage these elements to build a multidimensional political opinion space (Ramaciotti Morales, Cointet, Muñoz Zolotoochin, et al. 2023) on which to represent the estimated political opinions of a large sample of Twitter users ($N = 1,188,977$) connected to the French political debate. We demonstrate that this population is coherently positioned by examining expressed opinions towards a range of issues through text utterances. Next, we collected all tweets mentioning presidential candidates, from 2 weeks prior to the first round, and up to the day of the second round, resulting in a corpus of 22,614,172 tweets. We identify tweets that explicitly express voting intention or support for different candidates in the two phases, pre-

and post-first round, using a manual annotation scheme of the most frequently used hashtags (e.g. #dimanchejevotelen for voting intention or #marinepresidente for support). Finally, we analyze the position of the users that switched their preference between the first and the second round in the multidimensional political opinion spaces. In particular, we explain what are the dimensions that allow for voters swinging from the far-left to far-right candidate, which would be otherwise impossible for a coherently spatialized sample in a one-dimensional setting. Looking at the embedding in Fig.1, we find that the dimensions capable of explaining proximity between far-left and far-right candidates are coherent with previous propositions of disruptive elements in Western politics, crucially including attitudes elites, institution, and the question of the internationalization of the economy.

Our results help understand the reconfiguration of political competition, linking it to issue and ideology dimensions, on which preferences can be operationalized as distances, at least for large online populations. The findings also allow us to frame these transformative elements in the broader discussion surrounding populism, globalization, and mistrust in institutions.

References

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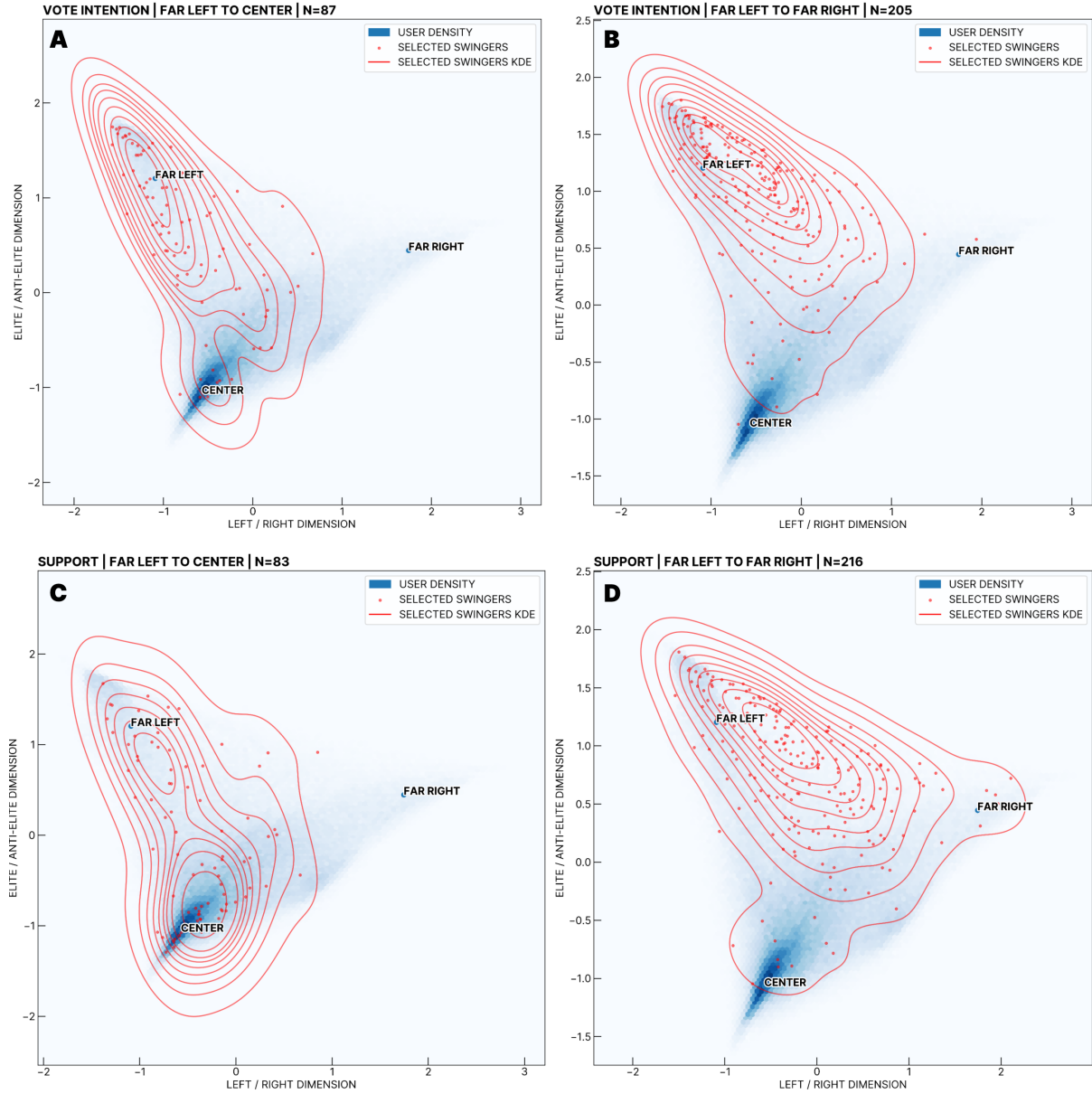


Figure 1: Positions of users in the ideological space that switch from the far right to the center candidate (A and C) and users that switch from the far right to the far left candidate (B and D). The x-axis corresponds to a dimension highly correlated to a left-right dimension according to the CHES survey. The y-axis, on which the far-left and the far-right candidate are closer than on the first one, corresponds to an axis related to elite/anti-elite sentiment. We annotate switching of vote intention (A and B) and expressed support (C and D). In all cases, the high-density regions of swingers are situated closer in the space to the candidate they switch to.