

How Terror Attacks Shape Political Agendas on Multiculturalism in France

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Submitted: 3 December 2024 **Accepted:** 20 May 2025 **Published:** 8 July 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Illiberal Politics in Europe” edited by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), Dean Schafer (Mississippi State University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i453>

Abstract

Terror attacks do more than take lives, they reshape the boundaries of political discourse. This article examines how terror attacks in France (2014–2021) influenced political agendas on multiculturalism by analyzing 143,870 tweets from major political parties. Drawing on data from the AUTHLIB project, we apply multilingual RoBERTa and DistilBERT models for natural language inference and sentiment analysis. While evidence of salience contagion is limited, our findings reveal position contagion: mainstream parties adopted increasingly negative rhetoric on cultural diversity and especially Islam in the aftermath of attacks, echoing far-right narratives. In contrast, the Front National (renamed Rassemblement National in 2018) consistently maintained its negative framing. This dual dynamic—mainstream parties shifting rightward while far-right rhetoric remains constant—contributes to the normalization of illiberal positions in French politics, where civic values, particularly *laïcité*, are deployed to justify cultural and religious exclusion. Methodologically, the article introduces an innovative approach for tracking party positions over time using social media data and natural language processing. Beyond the French case, the study underscores a broader paradox: liberal democracies, in seeking to defend their foundational values, may increasingly adopt illiberal discourse that undermines the very principles they aim to protect.

Keywords

far-right; France; illiberalism; Islam; party communication; terror attacks

1. Introduction

Terror attacks do more than claim lives, they redraw the boundaries of what can be said politically, especially in debates over national identity (della Porta et al., 2020). This article analyzes how political parties responded

to three major attacks in France: the Charlie Hebdo and Hypercacher shootings (January 2015), the Bataclan massacre (November 2015), and the Nice truck attack (2016). We focus on party communication in the wake of these events, with particular attention to the framing of multiculturalism in political discourse. Central to our analysis is the convergence—or divergence—between far-right and mainstream parties in their rhetoric before and after these attacks. By tracing shifts in emphasis and tone, particularly negativity, we examine how such critical events shape political agendas and contribute to the spread of exclusionary cultural narratives, central to illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024). In doing so, we highlight a broader paradox: liberal democracies, in seeking to defend what they perceive as the liberal order, may increasingly rely on illiberal discourse that ultimately undermines the very values they seek to protect.

This article aims to fill a key gap in the literature on political parties and the far-right. While existing research has extensively examined electoral dynamics—understandably so, given both the growing influence in the ballots of these parties and the abundance of campaign data—it has largely overlooked how party communication evolves between elections, especially in response to critical events. This gap is significant, as understanding how mainstream parties respond to terror attacks is essential, at least for two reasons. First, it illuminates their immediate tactical choices and reveals how far-right parties indirectly influence immigration politics through their impact on other political actors. Second, understanding how parties interact and portray themselves to the public outside of electoral periods is essential in a context where citizens increasingly turn to (digital) media to learn about politics, and traditional channels of political communication, including party manifestos, seem to lose momentum. To address this gap, we use a novel empirical strategy taking advantage of the unique granularity of social media data. This approach allows us to observe real-time changes in parties' discourse before, during, and after terror attacks. We use a multilingual variant of the RoBERTa model pre-trained for natural language inference to classify 143,870 tweets over the 2014–2021 period.

While researchers mostly link the politicization of issues related to multiculturalism to long-term trends associated with the rise of far-right parties (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 1996; Mudde, 2007), the reconfiguration of political competition (Kriesi, 2013), and mainstream party strategies (Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020; Meguid, 2009; van Spanje, 2010), our article complements available knowledge by emphasizing the role of short-term factors. In doing so, we aim to understand if and how terror attacks contribute to the diffusion of negative views of multiculturalism in political agendas by shifting issue politicization dynamics between mainstream and far-right parties. Our study builds upon emerging research examining political parties' reactions to the European asylum policy crisis (Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) and terror attacks in Germany (Völker, 2024). We show that terror attacks catalyzed shifts in how political parties discuss multiculturalism. Specifically, while evidence of salience contagion remains limited, our analysis reveals position contagion: Mainstream parties adopted more negative rhetoric regarding cultural diversity and particularly Islam following attacks, increasingly aligning with far-right narratives. Differently, the Front National (FN; Rassemblement National [RN] since 2018) maintained a stable negative rhetoric. This dual process—mainstream parties shifting rightward while far-right actors maintain negative narratives—contributes to the normalization of illiberal positions in French politics, where civic values, and notably *laïcité*, are used as tools to justify cultural and religious exclusionism.

This study contributes to existing literature in two key ways. First, it demonstrates how far-right ideas enter the mainstream through the spread of exclusionary civic frames in political agendas. This process reflects a

broader trend of normalizing illiberal discourse on ethnic and cultural diversity—particularly Islam—blurring the lines between radical and mainstream political rhetoric. Second, methodologically, the article introduces a novel granular measurement of party positions on multiculturalism-related dimensions between elections based on social media data, providing a valuable tool for future research.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework for analyzing shifts in political agendas on multiculturalism following terror attacks and examine the term's use in the French context. Second, we describe the research design and methods, before discussing the results.

2. The Politics of Multiculturalism and Terror Attacks

How do terror attacks influence parties' communication strategies on multiculturalism in between elections? Debates around multiculturalism have been central to political conflict (Esser, 2013), though the term itself and its use in the present work require careful conceptual unpacking. Multiculturalism encompasses distinct forms of cultural pluralism, from indigenous rights to immigrant integration, each raising different normative and practical challenges (Kymlicka, 1996). The concept has been variously understood as a demographic reality of cultural diversity, a set of public policies for accommodating difference, a form of political claims-making by minority groups (Koopmans et al., 2005), and a philosophical position on the recognition of cultural rights (Malik, 2014). In the European context, debates have primarily focused on the integration of post-war immigrants and their descendants, particularly regarding the accommodation of cultural and religious practices in public institutions. However, as Brubaker (2017) notes, these debates often conflate distinct issues such as questions of civic integration, religious accommodation, social cohesion, and national identity. In this study, we use the term “multiculturalism” rather than “ethnic and religious diversity” or “immigration” as an umbrella concept to emphasize not only the coexistence of diverse groups but also the societal frameworks, policies, and ideologies that shape and are shaped by this diversity. This encompasses issues related to immigration and cultural diversity, including Islam. In other words, while “ethnic and religious diversity” describes the demographic reality, “multiculturalism” engages with the broader cultural and political implications central to our analysis. Building on this conceptualization, we understand political agendas about multiculturalism as the set of structured policy priorities and ideological objectives that political actors advance through communication channels regarding immigration and cultural diversity (Kingdon, 1984). This aligns with understanding the politicization of these issues as “an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system” (Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 2), driven by competing framing strategies—specific ways of defining the meaning of the same problem (Entman, 1993). The literature on political parties and the far-right has provided crucial insights into how these issues acquired growing relevance in contemporary politics. Still, available scholarship has predominantly focused on electoral dynamics, somehow overlooking what happens outside election times, particularly in the context of short-term extremist violence.

For decades, opposition to multiculturalism has been central to far-right parties whose worldview combines nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2023). These parties, emerging in the 1970s, uniquely politicized immigration and diversity issues that were previously peripheral to other parties' campaigns (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 1996), playing the role of challengers within political systems (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). While initially marginalized among voters, far-right parties and their nativist campaigns have progressively gained centrality in European countries (Arzheimer, 2018; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017),

sometimes even entering governments and redirecting policies (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). This increasing influence has led specialists to talk about a long-term process of the mainstreaming of far-right politics, underscoring how these parties have successfully pushed multiculturalism to the forefront of political agendas (Mudde, 2019). Specialists of party competition have zoomed in on the dynamics of inter-party interactions during elections, and their effect on specific issues, notably immigration (Meguid, 2005; van Spanje, 2010), but the results remain unclear (see Rovira Kaltwasser & Bale, 2021). Some contend that growing support for far-right parties pushes mainstream parties to emphasize immigration more in elections (salience contagion). Others, instead, argue that electoral competition also encourages them to shift towards negative positions on immigration (position contagion; see Abou-Chadi, 2016; Meguid, 2005, for an overview). Additional evidence suggests that center-left parties are less affected by far-right success than center-right parties in both processes (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010). These developments result from far-right electoral success and mainstream parties' responses to voters' priorities (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Stier et al., 2018). Still, none of these studies covers between election times or the context of terror attacks. This gap may be partly explained by the rising electoral success of these parties, but also by the limitations of commonly used data sources—such as electoral manifestos and expert surveys—which often lack the depth and flexibility needed to capture dynamic shifts over time.

Another strand of research examines how terror attacks influence political parties' engagement with multiculturalism between elections. Acts of terrorism significantly impact party behavior because these events place topics on the party-system agenda, compelling other parties to address them, regardless of their own interests (Green-Pedersen, 2019). Focusing on the 2014 EU migration policy crisis, Gessler and Hunger (2022) show that in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, mainstream parties could not ignore the immigration issue under those circumstances. They found that salience contagion (already present before the long summer of migration) intensified during the crisis but diminished afterward. However, they do not find strong evidence of position contagion. Hutter and Kriesi (2019) corroborated these findings across all EU countries, observing similar patterns of salience contagion without positional shifts. Recently, Völker (2024) examined the consequences of Islamist violence in Germany. She demonstrated that the far-right party (Alternative for Germany) and mainstream-right parties converged in attributing the central security threat to migration. These arguments dominated political discourses after the attacks, while left-wing parties adopted different positions that featured less prominently in political agendas. Our study builds on this body of literature to explore how mainstream and far-right parties politicize multiculturalism during periods between elections, particularly in the context of large-scale terror attacks.

We expect mainstream parties to engage in strategic adjustment between elections as they compete with the far-right's politicization of multiculturalism. Specifically, when far-right parties achieve electoral success, competing parties tend to adjust their positions to maintain their electoral appeal. Our theoretical framework assumes that this contagion effect operates through two interrelated mechanisms: salience (mainstream parties discussing multiculturalism more frequently) and position (adopting more negative sentiment on multiculturalism). The salience contagion mechanism emerges as mainstream parties face dual pressures: the need to respond to intensified far-right rhetoric and heightened public attention following terror attacks (Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Völker, 2024). The position contagion mechanism operates through Islamist attacks that function as critical junctures—disrupting the status quo and opening space for significant political and discursive change (della Porta et al., 2020). These junctures do not merely reflect

existing tensions; they actively reshape political possibilities by enabling certain actors and legitimizing specific narratives in the public sphere while constraining others. In this context, opposition to multiculturalism spreads across the political spectrum, normalizing resistance to cultural pluralism.

3. Research Design

3.1. Case Selection

France provides an exemplary case for examining political parties' communication on multiculturalism in the context of terror attacks. The country's unique assimilative approach to integration was shaped by the revolutionary ideals of citizenship based on individual rights rather than group identities, further crystallized through the Third Republic's emphasis on secular education and civic nationalism. The cornerstone of this model, *laïcité*, formalized by the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and the State, evolved from an anticlerical movement aimed at limiting Catholic influence to become a fundamental principle defining the relationship between the state and religion (Doytcheva, 2018, 2021). This distinct form of *laïcité* demands the relegation of religious expression to the private sphere while promoting a shared civic culture in public spaces. The country's "republican universalism" model prioritizes the adoption of French cultural norms and values over the formal acknowledgment of ethnic or religious diversity, reflecting a long-standing resistance to Anglo-American forms of multiculturalism. However, this assimilationist approach has faced mounting challenges since the post-war period, particularly following decolonization and subsequent waves of immigration from the Maghreb. While conformism to the French republican political culture could simply be imposed during the colonial era, post-war migrants—particularly those of Muslim belief—have not been so easily assimilated and have sometimes demanded a *droit à la différence* (right to be different; Favell, 2001). The tension between republican universalism and the lived experiences of cultural diversity makes France a critical case for examining multiculturalism, not as an official policy, but as an analytical framework for understanding how a nominally universalist society grapples with religious and cultural pluralism, especially regarding the policies that impact Muslim communities.

Before the series of terror attacks that started in 2014, political agendas on multiculturalism in France emphasized debates over *laïcité*, exemplified by the 2004 ban on religious symbols in public schools and the 2010 ban on face-covering veils during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. The political landscape transformed dramatically following the Islamist attacks in 2015–2016. These events, occurring amid ISIS-led violence across Europe, prompted a significant shift in French politics (Mondon & Winter, 2017). Most notably, socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls's proposal to revoke citizenship from dual nationals convicted of terrorism—historically a FN flagship issue—and socialist President Hollande's attempt to constitutionalize emergency powers represented the left's growing acceptance of enhanced security measures. While both initiatives were ultimately abandoned, they contributed to legitimizing far-right security public discourse and created deep divisions within the Socialist Party. The period between 2017 and 2021 witnessed an intensification of these dynamics under Macron's presidency. A series of events—including the murder of teacher Samuel Paty in October 2020—led to increasingly restrictive policies targeting what the government termed "Islamic separatism." The 2021 "anti-separatism" law—officially called the law "reinforcing republican principles"—expanded state oversight of religious organizations and associations, while strengthening requirements for religious neutrality in public services. This rightward trajectory was further evidenced by Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin's criticism of Marine Le Pen for being "too soft" on Islam during a

televised debate, signaling how security and identity issues associated with Islam had come to dominate French political discourse (Mondon, 2024).

Despite the distinctive features of its citizenship model, France shares commonalities with other European countries. The country hosts a successful far-right party, the FN, which has been subject to a *cordon sanitaire* strategy by mainstream parties, at least at the national level and during the period considered in this article (Ivaldi, 2016). This approach is meant to isolate the far-right party politically and prevent the normalization of its ideas in mainstream discourse. Additionally, until 2021, like other European countries, France exhibits the paradox of stable public attitudes towards minorities alongside the growing visibility of these issues in public debates (Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 2021). While there is no single, universally accepted definition of what constitutes a mainstream or a far-right party (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019), in the article we follow Moffitt (2021) and define mainstream parties as ideologically moderate, electorally significant political actors with a realistic potential to govern or participate in government coalitions. In France, these correspond to the centrist party, En Marche (Renaissance since 2022), Les Républicains, and the Socialist Party. Close to these, we also consider Debout la France, the Front de Gauche (France Insoumise since 2016), Le Parti Communiste Français, Les Verts, and the Union des démocrates et indépendants (UDI) because of the prominent role they play in French politics. Similarly, we follow Mudde (2007) as updated by Pirro (2023) and consider the FN a far-right party (see Supplementary Material, Table A, for acronyms and original names).

3.2. Methodology

In our exploratory study, we aim to do two things: first, we identify and measure multiculturalism and its related dimensions, and second, we assess the sentiment of each mention. We focus on political communication by parties on social media, specifically by analyzing Tweets. To achieve these goals, we use transformer-based natural language processing models that are pre-fine-tuned for specific tasks and work directly with our data. These models excel at understanding language and context, making them more effective than traditional dictionary-based methods. This allows us to accurately classify large datasets and track language changes among different actors over time. More technical details on these models and the tasks they perform can be found in the Supplementary Material.

For identifying references to multiculturalism in each tweet, we label each observation to indicate whether it contains dimensions related to multiculturalism. The relevant dimensions we identified include assimilation, diversity, headscarves, immigration, Islam, jihadism, Muslim culture, secularism, the Bataclan terror attacks, and the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks (see Supplementary Material, Table B). We also check whether the texts refer to multiculturalism in general. These terms were selected for their significance within the French citizenship model, as previously discussed.

We classify each social media text as either including or not including each of the dimensions mentioned in the previous paragraph. To do this, we use a version of RoBERTa pre-trained on a natural language inference task. The model and task classify the logical relationship between pairs of sentences (premise and hypothesis), which is valuable for automating tasks that require human-like understanding across multiple languages. The model then labels the tweets based on the premises in Table B of the Supplementary Material, creating a classification for each dimension associated with multiculturalism. After labeling all tweets, we selected those marked as containing any reference to these categories and randomly checked

their accuracy. Table B in the Supplementary Materials also shows the number of texts identified for each dimension.

For sentiment measurement, we classify tweets based on whether their sentiment is negative, neutral, or positive. For this, we use a pre-trained, uncased DistilBERT model specifically designed for understanding tweets and their sentiments. This model was fine-tuned on a dataset of tweets for sentiment analysis (Igali et al., 2024). The fine-tuning trains the model to categorize tweets as positive, negative, or neutral, using a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates a low probability of the sentiment and 1 indicates a high probability. For example, a text with a positive sentiment score of 0.9 will be extremely positive in tone.

Finally, it is important to explain how we operationalize the pre- and post-event phases in our analysis. For texts related to terror attacks, we divide the data into two categories: pre-event and post-event. The pre-event category includes the 10 months leading up to each attack, while the post-event category covers the 10 months following each event. We chose a 10-month window to avoid mixing our results with the discourse surrounding the November 2015 attacks and to maintain a consistent timeframe across events. This window, combined with data extending up to 2021, allows us to observe spikes in communication linked to large-scale terror attacks as expressions of political reaction. More details about the events and the timeframes can be found in Table C of the Supplementary Material.

3.3. Data

The article draws on data for France from the AUTHLIB project, focusing on political parties' communication activity between 2014 and 2021. This timeframe covers several terror attacks that dramatically intensified debates about cultural integration and diversity, notably the Charlie Hebdo shooting, the Hypercacher kidnappings, the Bataclan Theatre massacre in 2015, and the Nice truck attack in 2016. This period not only captures the immediate impact of the attacks but also allows for comparison with other significant events in France during these years, including elections, providing a broader context of political discourse trends. While Twitter (now X) data has limitations, its granularity and real-time engagement with unfolding events made it ideal for analyzing how political parties adjusted their communication after the attacks. In addition, before Elon Musk's ownership in 2022, Twitter served as a primary communication channel between political institutions and the public (Bauer et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2019).

The focus of our analysis is on the discourse of all political parties that either secured at least 2% of the vote in any election or held representation in parliament. These parties—whose Twitter handles are detailed in Table B in the Supplementary Material—range across the political spectrum from the far-left to the far-right and also include centrist parties and The Greens. Our far-left/far-right categorization is based on the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2024), and for other party families we use the PartyFacts database. Figure 1 shows the number of tweets by major political parties in France over time.

Our final dataset comprises over 1 million tweets from all major parties, which, after excluding retweets, amounts to 143,870 tweets from January 2014 to December 2021. The tweets were collected using the MiNet library (Plique et al., 2024), and their distribution is illustrated in Figure 1. For data management, we translated texts utilizing the Google API, especially since the RoBERTa model we employed does not support French. Around terror attacks in 2015–2016, there were clear spikes in tweet volume, suggesting increased

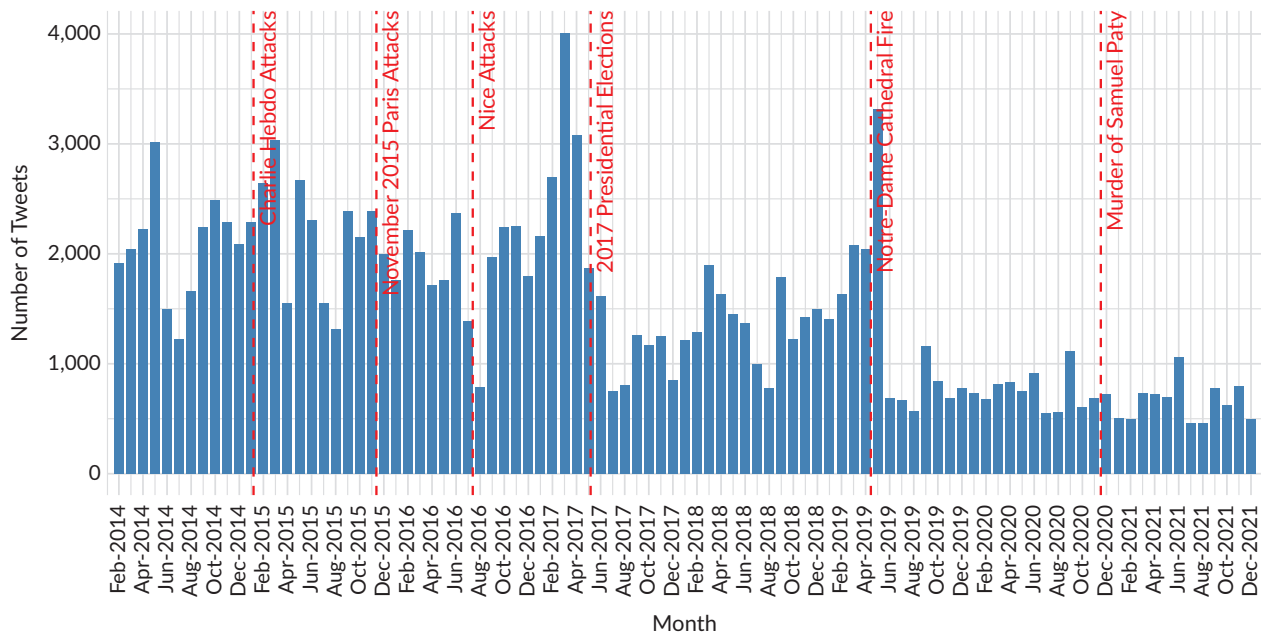


Figure 1. Distribution of tweets of major French political parties over time.

political communication. Similarly, periods leading up to elections in 2017 also saw heightened tweeting activity across parties. In contrast, other intervals exhibited lower and more variable tweet counts, potentially reflecting less intense political communication.

4. Results

The analysis is structured in three interrelated steps. First, we examine whether and how mainstream parties and the FN/RN emphasize multiculturalism, focusing on how much attention—or salience—issues related to immigration and cultural diversity receive in Twitter posts across major parties in France in the context of terror attacks. Second, we analyze political parties' positions on the same issues related to multiculturalism, specifically their negativity, and investigate whether parties adopt more negative views. Finally, we conduct a more fine-grained analysis of these shifts by examining the framing strategies that accompany them, with a particular focus on the theme of *laïcité*, which became central to political agendas in the aftermath of Islamist attacks.

4.1. The Salience of Multiculturalism in the French Party System and the Responses to the FN

To begin, we examine whether, when, and to what extent mainstream parties and the far-right engaged in political communication on multiculturalism, highlighting the dynamics of salience contagion. To measure the salience of multiculturalism in parties' Twitter communication and its emergence on the political agenda in the context of large-scale terror attacks, we simply count the number of tweets referring to multiculturalism, i.e., the keywords identified before by the FN and compare it to that of the other major parties in France, with particular attention to temporal patterns around large-scale terror attacks. Figure 2 presents the total volume of multiculturalism-related mentions across French political parties, providing insight into how various parties engaged with this issue.

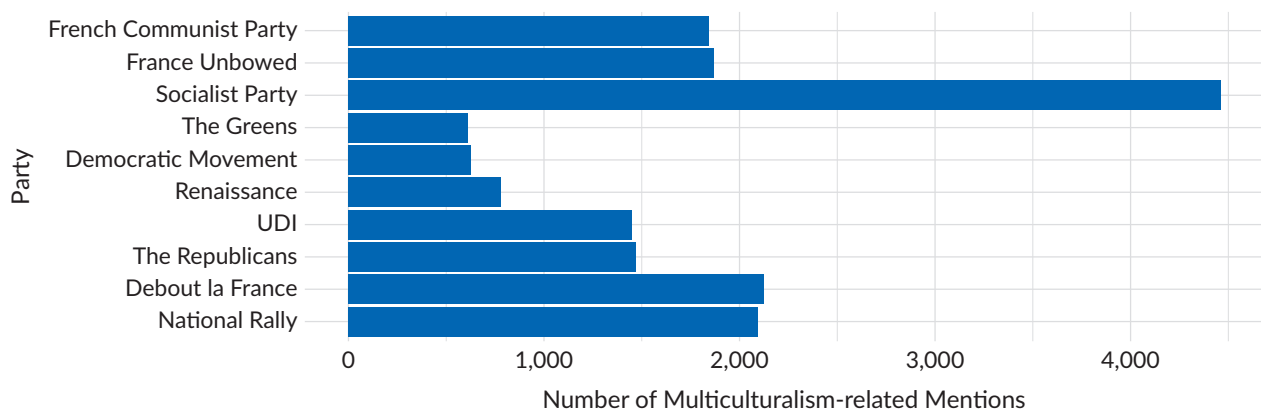


Figure 2. Total mentions of issues related to multiculturalism by French political parties between 2014–2021.

The data reveals that all major political parties in France have communicated about multiculturalism on Twitter, albeit with important differences, with an average of approximately 1,640 mentions per party. The Socialist Party demonstrates exceptional engagement, with approximately 4,100 mentions—nearly 2.5 times the average—suggesting a strategy to maintain ownership of the issue despite the challenging political climate following the terror attacks. Four other parties exceeded the average engagement: National Rally and Debout la France (both around 2,100 mentions), followed by France Unbowed and the French Communist Party (both approximately 1,800 mentions). This distribution reveals how parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum—from the mainstream center-left socialists to the far-right FN—prioritized multiculturalism in their communications, albeit presumably with different framing approaches. Five parties fell below the average engagement threshold. The Republicans and UDI (both approximately 1,300 mentions) demonstrated moderate but below-average attention to multicultural issues. The mainstream centrist parties—Renaissance and the Democratic Movement—and The Greens showed substantially lower engagement (600–700 mentions), less than half the system-wide average. This pattern suggests a potential strategy by mainstream centrist formations to minimize emphasis on multiculturalism in their communications. The distribution around the average reveals a U-shaped pattern of issue engagement, where multicultural discourse was most prominent at the ideological poles while mainstream centrist parties appeared reluctant to emphasize these potentially divisive themes. This distribution of mentions across the political spectrum indicates that multiculturalism was not exclusively dominated by far-right discourse but rather remained a topic of significant engagement across the French political landscape. It is particularly of interest to see how these mentions are higher for the more right-wing or left-wing parties, with the exclusion of the Socialist Party, however, we can see in Figure 3 published fewer posts related to multiculturalism over time. We find similar results for the mentions specifically related to Islam as shown in the Supplementary Material.

To shed light on the temporal dynamics of these debates, Figure 3 tracks the evolution of multiculturalism-related tweets over time, highlighting key events that may have influenced parties' communication strategies.

The Socialist Party demonstrates the most dramatic temporal pattern, with particularly intense engagement during 2016–2017, reaching peaks of 60–80 weekly tweets. This period coincides with the 2017 presidential election campaign, suggesting a strategic emphasis on multiculturalism during this pivotal

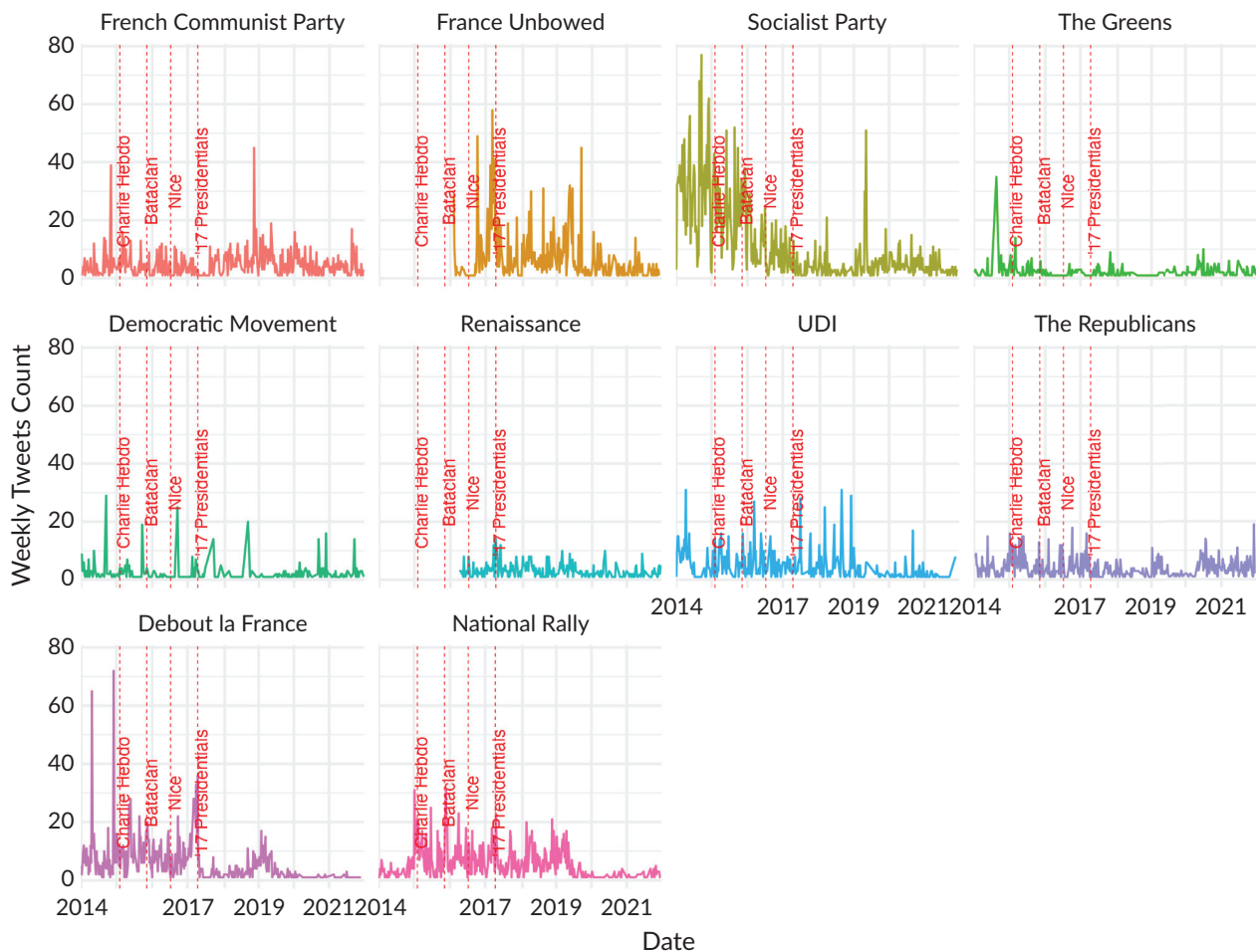


Figure 3. Saliency of multiculturalism in tweets in France by party.

moment. Following this peak, the Socialist Party's engagement with multiculturalism declined. France Unbowed shows a similar though less pronounced pattern, with notable spikes around 2017 (approximately 60 weekly tweets) that subsequently diminished. The French Communist Party maintained more consistent engagement over time, with periodic increases but without the dramatic peaks seen in other left-wing parties. The FN/National Rally displayed relatively steady engagement from 2014 through 2021, with moderate spikes following key events marked in the timeline, particularly around the Bataclan attack and the 2017 presidential election. Centrist, mainstream parties (Renaissance and the Democratic Movement) and The Greens showed the lowest and most sporadic engagement, with only occasional spikes rarely exceeding 20 weekly tweets. This confirms their generally lower prioritization of multiculturalism in their communication strategies. Notably, several parties exhibit response patterns to major events, particularly the Charlie Hebdo attack (January 2015), the Bataclan attack (November 2015), the Nice attack (July 2016), and the 2017 presidential election. These events appear to have temporarily increased engagement across the political spectrum, though with varying intensities. The UDI party, for instance, shows distinct spikes following the 2019 and 2021 events. The temporal analysis reveals that while multiculturalism remained a consistent feature of French political agendas, its saliency fluctuated significantly over time, peaking during moments of national crisis and electoral campaigns. Building on these findings regarding saliency, the next step is to examine the positions taken by different parties on multiculturalism, particularly the degree of negativity expressed, as outlined in the position contagion mechanism of the theory.

4.2. Mainstream Parties' and FN Positions on Multiculturalism: Systemic Trends in Negativity

We observed that while the far-right maintains the most consistent focus on multiculturalism, it does not always have the highest level of attention. This topic, however, gains prominence during terror attacks. But do political parties adopt more negative views? To explore this, we turn to the sentiment analysis of the tweets to assess the theoretical argument of positional contagion. To begin with, Figure 4 maps the general evolution of the tone of multiculturalism in the French party system.

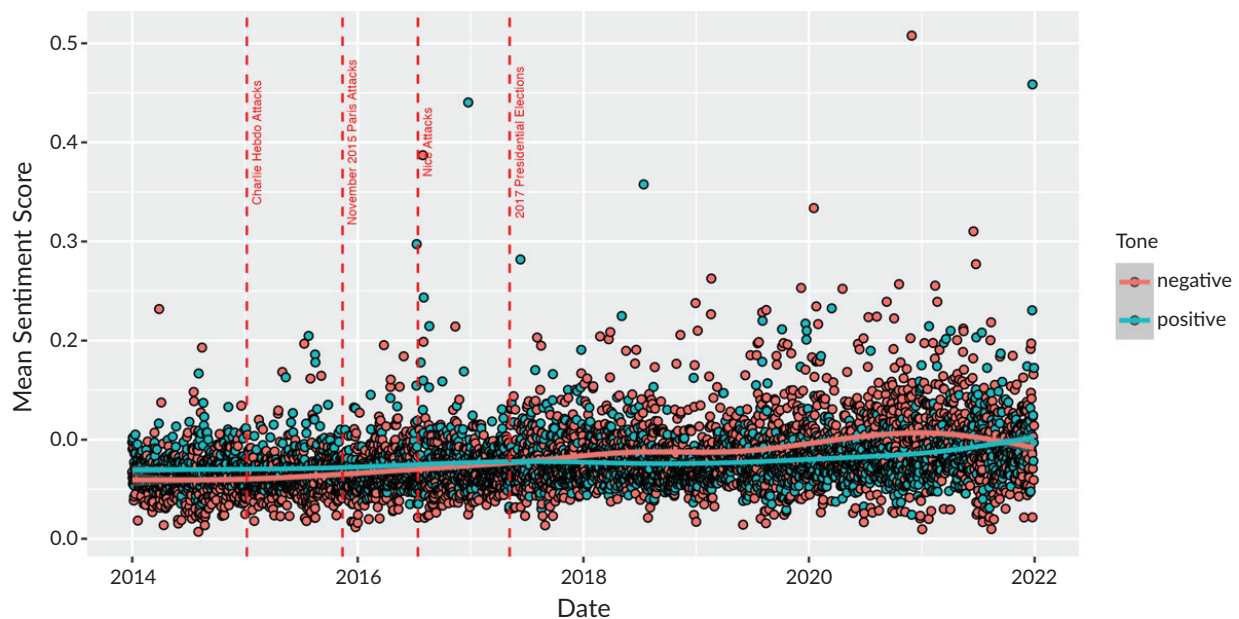


Figure 4. The sentiment of tweets on multiculturalism by major political parties in France over time.

Figure 4 illustrates the sentiment of tweets by French political parties over time, with negative sentiment shown in red and positive sentiment in teal. Overall, the figure shows minor fluctuations in the sentiment expressed in tweets by political parties over time. Still, around terror attacks and the 2017 elections, there are spikes in negative sentiment, suggesting that parties' communication became more critical of multiculturalism during these periods. Between terror attacks, the sentiment appears more mixed, with both negative and positive tones present. Figure 5 further illuminates the position contagion mechanism by showing the mean sentiment scores (positive and negative) for various political parties regarding multiculturalism before and after terror attacks.

Figure 5 presents sentiment analysis scores related to multiculturalism for major French political parties, with negative sentiment shown in the left panel and positive sentiment in the right panel. The figure compares sentiment before (circles) and after (triangles) terror attacks. Overall, the sentiment landscape shifts toward greater negativity and reduced positivity following terror attacks, suggesting a broader political hardening toward multiculturalism across the French party system. More specifically, negative sentiment increased post-attacks for nearly all parties but less so for the FN/RN. This shift is especially pronounced for the French Communist Party, the mainstream Socialist Party, and The Republicans. The Democratic Movement also saw a slight increase in negative sentiment, although it remained relatively low. Interestingly, the FN showed a slight decrease in negative sentiment after the attacks, potentially reflecting a consistently

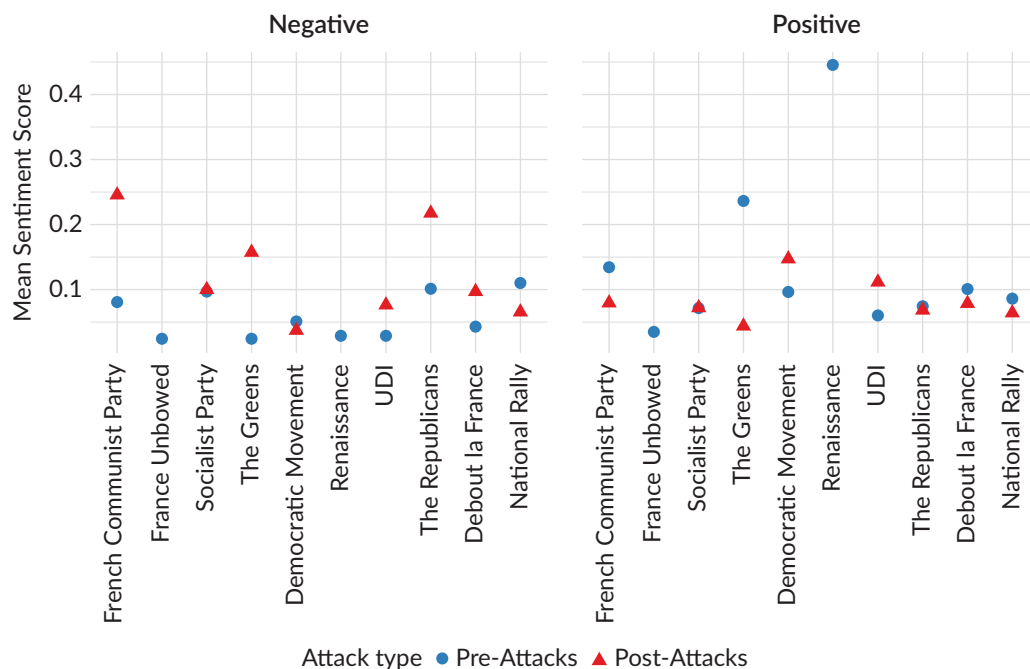


Figure 5. Sentiment scores on multiculturalism score before and after terror attacks for major political parties in France.

critical stance that did not intensify further. On the positive sentiment side, most parties exhibited a decline post-attacks. However, the Democratic Movement and Socialist Party stand out as exceptions, showing modest increases in positive sentiment. In sum, these findings suggest that French political parties became more polarized in their negative framing of multiculturalism, while positive expressions grew less common. In the next section, we explore salience and position dynamics for the topic *laïcité* that has been central in debates around multiculturalism, especially in the context of Islamist terror attacks.

4.3. An Exclusionary Civic Frame: *Laïcité*

To further investigate the mainstreaming of far-right positions on multiculturalism, we zoom on political communication about *laïcité*. Figure 6 presents a sentiment analysis of tweets related to the topic of *laïcité* across French political parties from 2014 to 2021. By doing so, we can identify the extent to which political parties resorted to *laïcité* in public debates.

The figure displays positive sentiment values above the horizontal axis and negative values below. Several key patterns emerge over time. While *laïcité* has traditionally been invoked to defend secularism, it has increasingly become a contested rhetorical tool, used by parties across the political spectrum to advance differing agendas. The FN consistently exhibits the most negative sentiment toward *laïcité*, which may seem counterintuitive given the party's anti-immigration stance. However, this likely reflects its rejection of liberal or multicultural interpretations of *laïcité*—those that tolerate or accommodate minority religious practices. From this perspective, the FN frames *laïcité* negatively when it is associated with protecting diversity rather than enforcing cultural conformity.

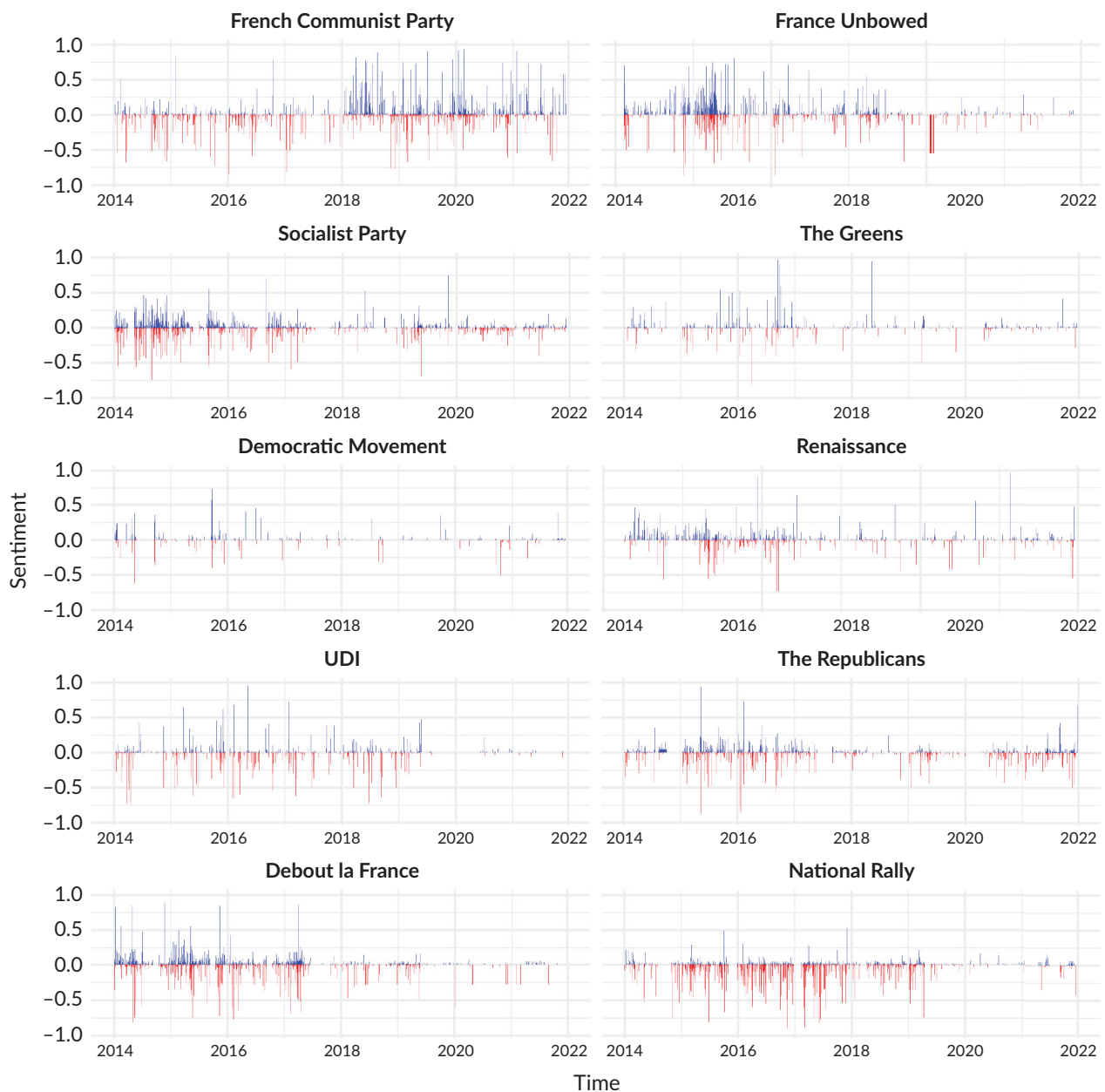


Figure 6. Sentiment analysis for the topic *laïcité*.

Mainstream parties such as the Socialist Party and The Republicans show more variability in sentiment, with spikes in negativity often coinciding with events like the 2015 terror attacks. This suggests that, at times, they have aligned rhetorically with the far-right, adopting more exclusionary interpretations of *laïcité* in response to public pressure or radical-right framing. In contrast, far-left parties like the Communist Party and the Greens generally express more positive or neutral sentiments, likely embracing *laïcité* as a protective and inclusive secular ideal.

Other parties—such as Debout la France, Renaissance, and France Unbowed—demonstrate intermittent negativity, particularly around major political events, indicating their engagement in ongoing debates over the meaning of secularism. Overall, our findings suggest that *laïcité* is increasingly used to negatively frame

multiculturalism, especially in the wake of Islamist attacks. Examples of this include mainstream party tweets such as: “Le voile islamique est un combat essentiel pour la République” (“The Islamic veil is a fundamental battle for the Republic;” Socialist Party) and “Laïcité means freedom from religious pressure. If you can’t accept our values, maybe France isn’t for you” (The Republicans).

5. Conclusions

This study investigates how terror attacks shape political agendas on multiculturalism, using France as a case. By analyzing 143,870 tweets from the French political parties between 2014 and 2021, we explore the dynamics of salience and position contagion in party communication, with a specific focus on how far-right narratives relate to mainstream discourse. The results contribute to the broader understanding of how illiberal discourses gain traction in European democracies, particularly in between elections, during periods of heightened public tension.

The findings reveal significant shifts in political discourse around multiculturalism during terror attacks, aligning with previous research while also highlighting notable differences. Differently from Gessler and Hunger (2022), we do not find clear evidence of the salience contagion mechanism, e.g., that these terror attacks increased the overall salience of multiculturalism in French politics. We find that the far-right maintains the most consistent focus on multiculturalism, but it does not always have the highest level of attention. This absence of salience contagion may be attributed, at least partly, to the imprecise definition of what is encompassed in the broad concept of multiculturalism and how it is operationalized, making it difficult to track consistent patterns of increased attention across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, we do find evidence of heightened negative attention to the issue across the party system during terror attacks. In fact, terror attacks appear to trigger a shift towards more negative and less positive sentiment on multiculturalism, reinforcing polarization.

A central element of this process is the use of an exclusionary civic frame—a discursive strategy that reinterprets civic values, particularly *laïcité*, to justify cultural and religious exclusion. In line with previous research, the findings show that civic values can be used as tools to justify exclusionism (Doytcheva, 2021; Froio, 2018; Halikiopoulou et al., 2013; Mudde, 2024). The far-right frequently portrays *laïcité* in negative terms when it is linked to pluralism or multicultural accommodation. Meanwhile, in the context of terror attacks, mainstream parties become more negative towards multiculturalism and visible religious expression, portraying them as threats to civic unity and national identity. Growing negativity at the party system level contributes to the erosion of distinctions between far-right and mainstream political rhetoric, especially on issues of identity and integration. Furthermore, we observe that negative sentiment toward multiculturalism persists well beyond the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks. This suggests that these discursive shifts are not merely reactive, but part of a deeper, structural transformation in how cultural diversity and religion inform political conflict in France (Kriesi, 2013).

Methodologically, the study’s innovative approach leveraged social media data and advanced natural language processing techniques, providing an unprecedented granular view of political discourse between elections. This methodology transcends traditional “snapshot” data sources like electoral manifestos and expert surveys, offering deeper insights into political communication processes. While insightful, the study acknowledges several methodological constraints. The focus on specific terror attacks provides only a partial

view of political discourse dynamics. The reliance on Twitter may overrepresent elite political actors while underrepresenting broader societal perspectives, limiting the generalizability of the analysis. Future research should address these limitations notably by conducting comparative studies within and without Europe, triangulating findings using diverse data sources, exploring smaller-scale incidents and protest mobilizations, and tracking the long-term electoral and policy impacts of these discursive shifts to address causality. Notwithstanding its limitations, our findings demonstrate how terror attacks can act as catalysts for discursive shifts, enabling the normalization of illiberal positions toward cultural diversity and Muslim minorities. These insights not only illuminate political developments in France but also point to a deeper paradox in contemporary democracies: in their efforts to safeguard liberal values, democracies may resort to illiberal discourses that ultimately erode those very principles.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank their colleagues at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE) at Sciences Po Paris for their valuable feedback and support. Special thanks go to Shrey Mishra for his assistance with the code and to Jean-Philippe Cointet for his guidance during the data collection process. The authors would also like to thank the participants of the Global Illiberalism. Comparative Approaches and Transnational Connections workshop organized by the Illiberalism Studies Program for their valuable feedback. This research was conducted within the framework of the Horizon Europe-funded AUTHLIB project (Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response), which provided an intellectually stimulating environment for this work. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the EU or UK Research and Innovation. Neither the EU nor the UK Research and Innovation can be held responsible for them.

Funding

This work was supported by the EU Horizon Europe Research and Innovation program under grant agreement No. 101061621 (AUTHLIB—Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The code used for the analysis is publicly available at: <https://github.com/elenacossu/terror-attacks-france>

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the data, access to the full dataset is restricted. Interested researchers may request access by contacting the authors directly.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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