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À la comment du peuple – How youth communicated, connected, and collaborated online around the French presidential election of 2022

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À la comment du peuple — How youth communicated, connected, and collaborated
online around the French presidential election of 2022

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Abstract

How are French youth communicating online with themselves and how are they interacting with the information they consume? This study considers the question by examining YouTube comments from the comment sections of two interviews done on presidential candidates during the 2022 presidential election by 26-year-old influencer, Hugo Decrypte. These comments were compared with comments from interviews done by traditional TV news sources on the same candidates (BFMTV, a privately owned broadcaster, and *Touche pas à mon poste!*, an originally public broadcast hosted by a Gen-X TV personality). The comments were scraped using Octoparse web data extraction software and then sorted by 'likes'. Based on their rankings, a close reading was done of the top five to ten comments and these comments were further compared to public polling and survey data on political motivation and ideology. The findings show that despite increasing polarization in the online space, French youth actively seek neutral information about and on both sides of the political spectrum. French youth also primarily connect over ideological similarities instead of connecting under political parties. French youth online use comment sections as places to share, collaborate, and connect over their political beliefs and share their opinions freely.

Keywords: France, Politics, Online, Election, Digital Media, Protest, Comments

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Introduction

“It's all online nowadays,” said my host mother in France¹ as I puzzled over my scrapped plans for the day now that the subway lines had been shut down during the ongoing strikes in 2023. “They plan everything online, you should go and look so you know what's going on, you know — you get your news there.” She was right; when I delved into the online space it was a surprisingly drastic change from what I had grown up with in America. French commenters spoke primarily about themselves in relation to the issues. French youth also focused more heavily on neutrality and lacked attacks towards political opponents. Within the comment sections of videos created by others, French youth announced and explained their ideas as well as emphasized their concerns for the future — the climate, social inequality, and economic stability. Indeed, with misinformation online spreading the internet is often characterized as a menace to politics and democracy — yet the internet simultaneously allows for beneficial connection and political participation as seen during the 2023 retirement strikes where youth organized online to coordinate strike days. The internet is a tool and means of communication that after the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is an increasingly essential part of life in France. As the 2022 presidential election was the first to fall after the election, the amount of political participation online was ever greater.

How do French youth voice and express their opinions outside traditional political institutions and channels in their country? What are their concerns and how do these concerns manifest online and in real life? This study explores these questions in the context of the time period directly before and after the 2022 French presidential election. Elections are naturally a time of increased political discussions as well as participation in its myriad forms, and the 2022 election was no exception. Policies such as the banning of the headscarf and retirement

¹ I formally studied in France for a year after living previously in my childhood. Due to my capabilities of understanding the French language all translations are done by myself, unless otherwise stated.

age were brought into question once again as the election represented an opportunity for laws to change by the new administration. Politicians who run for office must also increase their own political participation as they campaign on the Internet, TV, and Radio. The scholarship often examines each of these elements individually, but through the election, these elements can be studied in tandem.

In 2022, President Emanuel Macron — who had been the young charming newcomer to the political sphere not five years ago — was now the incumbent and old news. Criticized for his disconnect with the common people, Macron continued to try to connect with the French populace online. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, however, became known as the social media candidate for its major use in his campaign strategy of reposting every clip of himself online. Both Marine Le Pen and Yannick Jadot also took to the internet to rally and connect with their extreme bases. The election cycle and resulting campaigns took place shortly after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February, resulting in increased pressure to ensure the next president would be capable of dealing with that and future serious conflicts.

How do French youth politically participate and communicate online in YouTube comment sections, and how is this seen in the real world when viewed through the 2022 French presidential election?

To answer this question, I examined YouTube videos and their comment sections, opinion polls, voter data, and expert accounts to give a view of the French political landscape and its nature online. This project focuses primarily on the most popular Gen-Z influencer, 26-year-old Hugo Decrypte, and his self-titled YouTube channels. Decrypte boasts over 800 million views and three million subscribers across his two YouTube channels.² His channel *Hugo Decrypte - Actus du Jour*³ covers daily news and *Hugo Decrypte - Grands Formats*⁴ hosts longer interviews that earned enough prestige that a quasi-majority of all presidential

² 2.3 million for his daily news channel and 1.2 million for his long-form video channel.

³ News of the day, or daily news.

⁴ Long-formats (longer videos)

candidates did interviews for his channel to reach younger audiences during the 2022 election. The actions online of French youth through this channel will be used to evaluate and illustrate the political online culture of French youth on YouTube and in life.

Background

A Global Northern and Western European country, modern-day France has a relatively long history, being one of the first nations in the world to turn to democracy following the French Revolution in 1799. Within the French country, the current republican system of government is a semi-presidential system wherein the president serves a five-year term. Much like one of the inspirations of the French Revolution (the United States), there are legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. In France, the first round of voting of the French presidential election is done between many candidates from different parties (twelve in 2022), and the second round of voting is done between the top two from the first round of voting. Presidential debates are often hosted in between the two rounds of voting and only take place between the top two candidates. The president of France has the authority to nominate the prime minister as well as is the commander in chief of the armed forces and is authorized to dissolve the lower house of the bicameral Parliament after consultation. The president is the most powerful office in the country, and also the most critiqued and well-known. This concentration of power and responsibility creates a scapegoat for most political issues, in turn rousing public discussion and debate.

In 2017 Emanuel Macron had defeated Marine Le Pen in the presidential election after each of them had replaced the traditional parties for conservatism and progressivism that had been the de facto parties in elections prior. Macron's center-left party, the *Renaissance*⁵ party, replaced the former socialist one and Le Pen's far-right party, the *Rassemblement National*⁶, had replaced the former center-right one. While relatively unremarkable, Macron's

⁵ *Renaissance* means Rebirth. At the time of the 2017 election the party was known as *La République En Marche*, or the Republic Marching Forward Party

⁶ National Rally

first term as president was characterized by a rather horrid perception from the average citizen. Macron was found to be arrogant and unempathetic to the plights of everyday French citizens. Under Macron French did become 1.6% better off in terms of purchasing power — with the top one percent of the rich becoming 2.8% richer — but the poorest five percent of France also became 0.5% poorer, lending credence to ideas of Macron's inability to connect with everyday citizens (Hewlett 395). With no major scandals, the question became: Was Macron good enough to stay in office, or had he angered enough people for change? Le Pen was a known name, with candidate Marine Le Pen being the daughter of Jean Marie Le Pen, a famous far-right politician and president of the *Rassemblement National* from 2011-2015. Marine Le Pen's extreme nature and aggression were her losing signature during the last election in 2017: the 54-year-old politician had been found by the public to be unprepared in the debate and too conservative.

In 2022 when the next presidential election was held, the election reflected France's changing political scene. While the election saw a victorious incumbent, many other trends were visible during the election. The election saw a decrease in electoral participation in a continuing trend of general political abstention since 2007.⁷ Macron, despite being victorious — also lost over 7% of his electorate to le Pen — in line with a continuing rise in far-right sentiment and a growing dislike of Macron.⁸ Despite not winning, Marine Le Pen had become notably more prepared and calm during the campaign. During his last term, Macron had used the police to violently beat back protestors protesting declines in public services and increased taxation on gas, moving more of the working class further from Macron and in turn further right (Hewlett 396). This view of Macron as a city elitist helped lend credence to the ideas of Le Pen's growing far-right. Along with these shifts, 2022 also saw returns to the

⁷ This information has no singular source, but is from the election results of each year (which are all cited in works cited).

⁸ If this 7% loss of votes continues into the 2027 election cycle, le Pen will win the 2027 election..

election tradition, such as in the debate format. In 2017, a presidential debate between five candidates had taken place before the first-round voting (BFMTV). In 2022, Macron refused to debate before the first-round voting was concluded, attempting to maintain some of the French election traditions (Garrat-Valcarcel 2022).

With the rise of social media platforms, over 72 percent of the French youth use social media or online sources daily for news consumption (Leduc). In an article by Alex Frame for the Public Relations Review, Safia Otokoré, a French socialist politician, highlights the appeal of using the internet to connect with youth: “[Social media] is a way of reaching young people, who won’t generally read reports or classical political information, but who will most likely read tweets.”

It’s not just youth: French politicians and major organizations use verified social media accounts to ensure their ideas are still credibly and reliably promoted to the public. A verified account will receive a verification badge from the platform which informs users that the account is really representative of who it claims to be. The creation of an official verified account for a politician on a social media is a strong indication that said social media is popular and relevant enough to the general public since it is of use to politicians. Since social media is used by the vast majority of the population — with even more using the internet — the French political world has been clearly affected as in other regions. These agents use social media and the internet to influence the public’s voting habits and political ideologies. This can be seen during the 2022 presidential election where a vast majority of candidates did both traditional television interviews as well as online interviews with influencers on platforms such as YouTube to reach younger voters. While Jean Luc Mélenchon, a left-wing candidate, was featured in interviews on TV — their online repostings only received hundreds of thousands of views. He also published his appearances on his YouTube channel where they attracted millions of views from new electorates. Eric Zemmour, a far-right

candidate made appearances on TF1 and BFM RMC⁹ — two traditional media outlets while also appearing on popular YouTuber Hugo Decrypte’s series of candidate interviews which attracted millions of views as well. Most notably, while many candidates have their own social media accounts on Instagram and Twitter, social media sites like YouTube are less ubiquitous among candidates for various reasons.

Social media takes a myriad of forms, each with different features and uses. These differences can create vastly different cultures between social media. Where a video on a VHS versus a DVD may be inconsequential, the difference between the same video on YouTube and TikTok is tremendous. While 2020’s social media like Instagram and TikTok were apps concentrated on short-form content, YouTube was a website concentrated on long-form content. This longer format allowed for YouTube to become the default for in-depth online news amongst the social media of the era. YouTube, launched in 2005, is an online video-sharing social media platform and the second most visited site online, second only to Google Search, a search engine run by Google LLC — the same company that runs YouTube (Belle Wong). YouTube as a social media platform focuses on long-form videos with a typical video lasting 10-20 minutes and are typically filmed widescreen to be viewed on a computer instead of a cell phone. YouTube can be viewed on any browser, and unlike other social media, does not require an account to use the website in the same ways that users with an account do. TikTok and Instagram both limit the capabilities of their websites when compared to their apps. Each app requires an account to function, and even with an account their website may lack certain features. A user without an account cannot scroll on Instagram without an account. YouTube allows for users without accounts to search for and watch videos freely as well as access curated content playlists and recommendations. Due to the

⁹ Television France 1 (a national TV news station) and Business FM Radio Monte Carlo (a private popular radio show).

platform's popularity and accessibility, it has become the primary site for sharing long-form political videos — such as the presidential debate or interviews with various politicians.

YouTube also has a comment section in which users can comment on videos (with a free account) and express their political beliefs and thoughts on the video they watched. YouTube comment sections also exemplify the ideas of political action online. These comments are means for youth to communicate, collaborate, and of course, comment on the political scene in France. Comments can vary greatly: on interviews made for YouTube, comments tend towards more discussion-based and long-form, whereas commenters on popular videos originally from elsewhere tend to have much more basic comments¹⁰. The comments are written informally with French-specific abbreviations at times, but not generally less acronyms allowing for the comments to be more accessible to others. English is essentially never used, despite English being taught heavily in France, especially to the younger generation. The comments generally read as indistinguishable spoken French and do not possess elements unique to the written form, lending credence to the idea that the comment section also functions as a public forum of debate.

The average age for a young person in France entering the workforce is twenty years old. These young people will typically not find a stable job for the next seven years (Muxel 2018). Young people in France also tend to leave the house earlier than their other European counterparts; the average age of departure from their parent's home is slightly over twenty-three years, compared to the general other European population leaving at just over twenty-six years old. This leads French youth to be very concerned with their futures and their security; during my years living in France, I remarked how French youth share concerns primarily centered on growing discontent with the government, job security, immigration, and

¹⁰ Comments on the former tend to have statements with “I...” and present their opinions on an issue and comments on the latter tend to just be phrases like “vote for [insert any politician]!” or “go [insert any politician or slogan]”. There are real world examples later on page 26.

environmentalism. Their outlook is grim: according to the *Generation What* survey of 320,000 French youth, roughly 53% consider their future to be worse than that of their parents at their age and 80% believe their children's future will be worse or the same as theirs. This has led to disillusionment and general apathy towards the general institutions of politics.

Review of Literature

When examining the unique merits of political discussion online versus in real life, Wenhao Bi surmises that freedom is the key factor. Bi, a Ph.D. student at the University of Warwick in England, studies social media, political involvement, and digital identities. In his research he expands on why youth may favor online communication for political action. In a 2022 article in the *Journal of Cultural Studies*, Bi examines various visual political art from memes to propaganda posters in China. Through analyzing the rhetoric and ideas expressed in these mediums online and the government response online, Bi posits that in China political action digitally has become a survival tactic due to the risks associated with direct engagement. The relatively relaxed rules for Chinese youth online (when compared to real life in China, not other nations) creates a unique dynamic on social media platforms fostering an idealized notion of public engagement. While both looking at different countries, both Hochmann and Bi clearly demonstrate online spaces being less regulated and censored than real-life spaces and how these online spaces are being used for political discussion and activism from all sides of politics due to the freedom online.

As the media consumed by youth leans more toward social media posts and less towards traditional and mainstream news, so too do the people delivering the news. While the general scholarship about influencers is rather broad due to the internet's ubiquity, specific scholarship around influencers in the public sphere generally agrees that for better or worse, influencers will be part of how information is received and diffused. Johanna Arnesson, an assistant professor from Umeå University in Sweden, states in a 2023 article in the *Journal of Media, Culture, and Society*: "influencers, consciously or not, function as ideological intermediaries" and legitimize politics to their audience. In analyzing the rhetoric used in four Swedish Influencers' posts on social media, Arnesson shows how influencers' appearances of

authenticity are often constructed to promote and sell products commercially and, in some cases, politically. Across the continent in Spain, Dr. Antonio Castillo-Esparcia, Ana Almansa-Martínez, and Lucía Caro-Castaño, professors of social science and communication from the University of Malaga (Castillo-Esparcia and Almansa-Martinez) and Cadiz (Caro-Castana), further expand on influencer's roles politically. In a 2023 Article in *Profesional de la información*, Castillo-Esparcia et al. examine posts and the general scholarship around different online social media activist movements from #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter to Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring. In each of these analyses, Castillo-Esparcia *et al.* look to the role of influencers in the political discussion of the issues and the interaction with it online. Castillo-Esparcia et al. categorize interactions into connecting, sharing, commenting, participating, and collaborating to further analyze the impact of activist media created by influencers. In their conclusion, they posit that “given that a large part of citizens’ lives is mediated by these platforms, it is critical for the proper functioning of deliberative democracy to advance transparency around the functioning of these algorithms.” They elaborate on how adjusting to the medium has resulted in the emergence of activism forms that promote their messages in entertaining formats to better connect with their young audiences and consumers. The governance of these platforms and the ways in which they moderate content has allowed the diffusion of hate speech resulting in many activists — especially women — leaving these spaces. Both of these studies help demonstrate the extent to which the political world, especially for youth, has been shaped by and will continue to be shaped by influencers.

Influencers are changing the political scene, and influencing happens to be a job in which youth are overrepresented. To best understand how youth communicate politically with one another, one should first observe how French youth perceive their own political, social, and economic climate as individuals. Anne Muxel — a senior researcher specializing in

sociology at the Centre for Political Research at Sciences Po — dives into the sentiment among French youth in her 2018 book *Politiquement Jeune*¹¹. She examines surveys from the 150-question *Generation What* survey of 320,000 18 to 35-year-olds in France from 2013 and a second wave in 2016. This survey was broadcast on television to ask youth about their lives, school, work, and relationship with citizenship and politics. Muxel presents the results, displaying that a majority of young people, 68% and 65% respectively, believe that France's education system does not give them a chance or reward merit. 87% said they had no confidence in the media, and a near-majority of 94% thought there was too much poverty. Muxel uses her figures to show the mental state of young people in France: they are concerned, typically with their futures, due to their changing world. For the youth, there's disillusionment with systems in France, political and otherwise. While these findings do not highlight exactly *how* youth have arrived at these conclusions, they nonetheless excellently clarify the zeitgeist of French youth.

These findings are corroborated by a similar and more in-depth study conducted on youth opinions on climate change in the United States and France by psychiatrist Dr. Isiah Thomas of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. The study contained 88% youth and 12% parents, in which the youth and parents were interviewed on their opinions on climate change and their future. This study was conducted via social media advertisements on platforms youth use like TikTok and Instagram, and therefore helps understand the online conversation around these issues for youth. Thomas et al. find that the majority were frustrated and angry about the climate crisis and felt burdened to fix the mistakes of previous generations. Thomas et al. use the term 'adultified children' to describe the feelings of both responsibility and naiveté that they feel, concluding that parents should provide healthy avenues for dealing with these concerns and should not shy away from political and current issues with their

¹¹ Politically Young

children. Thomas et al. warn of the dangers for parents of neglecting to focus on the concerns of their young children and this can be then in turn applied to the idea of a government neglecting the concerns of its young populace, the future populace.

The result of these feelings has resulted in not only apathy towards politics but abstention as well. Laurent Lardeux, a studies and research manager at the National Institute of Youth and Popular Education (INJEP¹²), examines this in a 2022 report. In April and May (election months in France), in collaboration with the Sciences Po Paris Center of European Studies and the Jean Jaurès Foundation, researchers conducted a phone survey of 1,723 French citizens meant to be representative of the French population. From this, Lardeux reports that during the presidential election 35% of voters ages 18-29 abstained during both voting rounds, versus 24% of all other age groups. He contrasts this with increasing participation in general and intermediate elections by youth, as well as participation in other modes of political participation like boycotts, petitions, and civil disobedience. Lardeux theorizes that these two factors demonstrate the ideas of French youth; voter abstention is not a reflection of a lack of desire to be politically active, but a reflection of viewing voting as useless to create political change.

When observing how people communicate with each other on social media, particularly in the political sphere, academic writing across the globe is plentiful. Drs. Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer from the Netherlands both conduct their research in the fields of new digital media and digital cultural research. In a chapter of the 2020 book *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation*, Rogers and Neiderer observe the various methods, formats, and techniques of political communication online, such as when examining the rise and popularity of ‘dark posts’ and ‘image macros’. ‘Dark posts’ are “micro-targeted [online]

¹² INJEP stands for *Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation Populaire* or National Institute of Youth and Popular Education

advertisements without a referral page anchoring the content for further investigation”, instead serving only to help amplify and circulate messaging. ‘Image Macros’, more popularly referred to as memes, are images with one to two lines of text which can be used to promote political ideas.¹³ Most notably, these two forms of media are seldom fact-checked or verified in other ways when they speak about political issues. By observing data on the most engaged with and most shared forms of political media, Rogers and Neiderer show that these two often unverified forms of media are the most engaged with and shared in social media political messaging. Rogers and Neiderer also examine which sides fake social media accounts may be working in support of. When examining an analysis of over 500,000 tweets leading to the 2017 Dutch Election and looking at 25 user accounts that consistently targeted a single political representative, the data showed that left-wing politicians were disproportionately negatively mentioned and right-wing politicians were in turn disproportionately positively mentioned.

These studies are paired with another analysis on Facebook of ‘dark posts’ wherein Rogers and Neiderer show only approximately 25% of these ‘dark posts’ are for political means with the rest being commercial. Rogers and Neiderer then go on to examine different laws from both the European Union and Dutch government, as well as policies from Newspapers and media organizations which they deem to be imperfect yet apt at containing the spread of misinformation. They postulate that despite the concerning rise in disinformation campaigns across social media, due to research and response on the part of the government, the issue remains between “small, older populations” or “those who have at their disposal time for fringe news consumption and spreading it among online friends.” They haphazardly theorize that the influence on the public is minimal due to the majority of news

¹³ Early memes of this era typically followed a top line set up, bottom line punchline format. In America, the “Thanks Obama” meme would have followed this format, with a picture and set up line about an inconsequential apolitical problem and the punch line “thanks obama”. This meme mocked President Obama’s critics for how people believed they unfairly blamed Obama for the country’s problems.

consumption still stemming from the mainstream. Rogers and Neiderer's work helps to show the divide between generations in how they behave politically online, noting that young people who tend to have more time for news consumption and spreading it online amongst their peers are more susceptible to new propaganda tactics in the online space.

Protecting against propaganda in the online space can oftentimes become conflated with censorship in political discussion. Thomas Hochmann, a French professor of public law at Université Paris Nanterre whose research focuses on constitutional justice and fundamental rights, speaks of the ineffective laws of France on the issue of hate speech in politics in a 2022 article in the *Journal of Media Law*. He examines law cases such as the anti-disinformation law, anti-hateful content law, Digital Service Act of the E.U., and the Support for Principles of the Republic Law. Hochmann goes on to show how the Law which aims to fight against hateful online content — that attempted to stop the spread of hate speech online by punishing “every single failure to remove certain contents within 24 [hours]” — was overzealous as well as promoted over-censoring to avoid government punishment. This law was thus struck down by the Constitutional Court. By maintaining that freedom of speech is more important than combatting misinformation, the case avows the importance of understanding media literacy and how youth evaluate the media they consume.

Methodology

To analyze this phenomenon, the project analyzed a case study of the comments of the comment sections on YouTube videos relating to the French presidential election in 2022. These comments were collected from videos of a 26-year-old YouTuber, Hugo Decrypte. For the purpose of this study, ‘youth’ refers to anyone under the age of 30 as most polls tend to stop at 30 when considering youth¹⁴. To understand how French youth discuss and evaluate politics, the project analyzed videos such as interviews with presidential candidates, recaps of debates, and candidate program summaries. I compared to similar videos on the platform from traditional news organizations. The videos from traditional news organizations were meant to act as equivalents to the interviews that Decrypte held with each candidate on his own channel. Each video would be a longer interview with the same candidate. These videos were chosen to give an understanding of the reporting from one young person to another during a time of increased political awareness and tension.

For each video, the project ran the comment section of the video through data scraping software. The comment section data was collected using Octoparse, an application that can scan text from websites (scraping). From the comment section, the project collected usernames, ‘like’ and ‘reply’ counts, and the comment text. This data was placed into a spreadsheet which was then organized by Voyant Tools. Voyant Tools is an online data visualization and analysis tool that displays word trends by frequency, placement, and other factors. In this project word frequency and variation were viewed primarily. The project collected the first top 400 comments from each video. I then closely read the top three to five comments noting syntax, individual word choice, context, and rhetorical devices. The rest of the comments were scanned for individual words but were not all closely read. For example,

¹⁴ The UN stops considering people youths at 24 but many French sources go over this, perhaps because 18 to 24-year-olds often respond similarly to 25 to 35-year-olds. Despite the popularity of using the two aforementioned age groups a fair amount of polls also used 18-29 as youth.

when looking for comments relating to the retirement age debate I searched for terms like *retraite, age, travail, bosse*.¹⁵ The project then compared these findings with the top 30 comments to evaluate tone. If the top 30 comments, which also contained the greatest number of likes, all mentioned Islam with a negative connotation, the project could surmise that this was the case for the rest of the comments.

Likes act to promote comments to the audience of the comment section. Due to the differing popularity of individual videos like counts on comments cannot be directly compared to comments on other videos, but can be used to illuminate trends of the viewer base. Users like comments they agree with. The chance of a popular issue or viewpoint not rising to the top of a comment section (which is often treated as a place of discussion and debate) is highly unlikely. It would have to be not only commented frequently, but each commenter who would comment their own opinion would also have to not like any comments agreeing with their opinion, which is highly unheard-of behavior. As comments accrue more engagement in likes and replies they are more shown by YouTube's algorithm and are in turn more interacted with. Within a comment section of 3,945 comments, five of the top 400 contained at least 3,000 likes, with the most popular having triple the amount of likes that the video has comments at twelve thousand likes. Liking (requiring only a single click) is a much easier form of comment section participation than writing an original comment, and thus is more common behavior than writing a comment. The like count on the video similarly has eighty-one thousand likes compared to the 3,945 comments. Because of this popular ideas and messages naturally rise to the top 400 comments of a comment section.

The project verifies and compares the general attitude and opinions of the commenters with various published small-scale polls (under 10,000 sample size) which were also taken during the election cycle, as well as larger polls and election data collected in the

¹⁵ In order: Retirement, age, work (formal verb and noun), work (informal slang verb ONLY).

past decade. Smaller polls include those done by the Sciences Po Paris Center of European Studies and the Jean Jaurès Foundation of 1,723 representative voters and the Institut Montaigne of 4,000 18 to 24-year-olds. Larger polls include the Generation What Survey of 320,000 French youth ages 18-35 as well as all official voting data for the presidential election's two voting rounds. These polls are used to compare the specific population of youth online to the general youth population as well as to the real-world actions of French youth.

This project suffers from certain limitations and constraints due to the timeframe and technology. The limited nature of the scraping technology used to mass analyze comments was not able to process each and every comment, which limits the view of the comment section as a whole. The methods for analyzing the structure and meaning of comments not reviewed personally were limited. At the level of mass data, comments could be searched for the words they contained but could not be properly analyzed for in which ways these words were employed. Another constraint was that the sample population was also unable to be completely demographically verified, as YouTube does not provide demographic information of accounts publicly. The demographics of interest would be French nationality and age to use only French youth for this project, but this information is not publicly available. The sample size is likely quasi-majority French youth due to certain factors. Firstly, the channel is a Francophone channel without subtitles in any language, meaning to understand the videos one must speak French. Secondly, the channel focuses on French politics and rarely mentions the rest of the francophone world unless it is related to a story about France itself, and therefore is semi-irrelevant to foreigners who are unaffected by French politics¹⁶. Thirdly, the channel primarily focuses on youths' interests like explaining political conflicts or new laws which they may be unaware of. This is also true in the video thumbnails (equivalent to a

¹⁶ This isn't always true. Sometimes Thesis students have weird projects and watch French political YouTube channels despite not being French nationals.

cover or front page), which use high contrast brightly multicolored images behind expressive headshots and bold words reading eye-catching phrases like ‘WORLD CONFLICT?’ ‘HIGH TENSION’ ‘GROUND ASSAULT’ and ‘RETURN OF WAR?’. These factors all are specific tactics that target French youth more than any other demographic and in turn, let the researcher deduce that a majority of Decrypte's YouTube audience will contain French youths.

Despite the aforementioned potential shortcomings of the methods of analysis, the findings remain relevant. Online attitudes are a reflection — if not a slightly distorted one — of real-life attitudes. Due to the ability to ‘like’ a comment to increase its visibility and show agreement, the top comments, when sorted by likes, nearly completely encapsulate the general attitude of the comment section. The top thirty or so comments are also observed in their language of origin first and foremost to attempt to keep the most authentic message. These factors all work together to provide a relatively accurate representation of youth political participation online during the 2022 French presidential election.

Analysis

Hugo Decrypte, a young political influencer and reporter, uses his YouTube channel in a way similar to how TV functioned in the past. During the 2022 presidential election, Decrypte held a series of approximately 40-minute interviews with most major candidates¹⁷ wherein he asked each candidate questions he had formulated based on the concerns of young voters. The interviews take place in a studio with professional lighting and sound where Decrypte and his interviewee sit across from each other while viewing a common screen. The candidates and Decrypte each have a camera on them for close-up shots as well as multiple around the studio to give wide shots similar to a TV interview. Between them sits a pillar with a button to press that freezes a selection of emoticons spinning like a slot machine. As the wheel of emoticons spins to a stop, Decrypte asks a question based on the topic that the emoticon represents — such as a question about polling when shown a bar graph emoticon. The interviews continue in this fashion for roughly seven questions. While the politicians wear their suits and blazers, Decrypte wears a simple cream pullover, black pants, and white sneakers — a look favored by French youth. Decrypte's questions follow in a similar vein, following what issues youths are most interested in. Instead of presenting his opinion on current issues (like a political commentator would), he instead attempts to use his platform as a neutral and informative source of information for young people.

¹⁷ Valérie Pécresse and Emanuel Macron (incumbent) were not interviewed in the series due to both covid and scheduling conflicts.



Figure 1: Hugo Decrypte Interviewing Marine Le Pen on his YouTube channel.

French political media mandates an equal amount of airtime on TV and radio must be given to each candidate (Ouest-France), however, such restrictions are far more difficult to enforce online. As a result, the previous law which was created in an attempt to ensure the fairness of the election by allowing equal exposure for each candidate to voters is becoming increasingly obsolete. As X (formerly Twitter) and other social media like YouTube become increasingly popular for interacting with politics, the potential for candidates to pay their way into more exposure and an advantage grows as well. Decrypte, like traditional French TV and Radio, maintains a similar practice in keeping each interview with a candidate to approximately the same length. In this way, Decrypte makes it clear how his channel is meant to be seen — not as another political commentator — but to serve as a pseudo-alternative for traditional French media for French youth. He is their next form, the next generation’s objective go-to news source.

In the top 400 YouTube comments left on HugoDecrypte’s video *Marine Le Pen: L’interview Face Cachée (Présidentielle 2022)*¹⁸, the most common word was *merci*, which means thank you in French (Decrypte *Marine Le Pen: L’interview Face Cachée*

¹⁸ The Hidden Side of Marine of Marine Le Pen Interview.

(*Présidentielle 2022*). The comments thank the team, ‘Hugo’, the respect given, always being neutral, making accessible and interesting content for youth, as well as the format (Sinclair and Rockwell). The thank you’s are sincere and comments in general very rarely use sarcasm or irony to convey their meaning. The overwhelming majority of comments surprisingly do not express their opinions on Marine Le Pen’s controversial stance on many issues. The most popular comment, with over twelve thousand likes (signaling agreement), says “What’s nice about the interviews on this channel is that unlike on television the interviewee’s responses aren’t being cut and everyone isn’t speaking at the same time! I have deep respect for your work, keep going!”¹⁹(@monsieurmuerte). The next user concurs writing “I’m shocked by the quality of these interviews which are objectively better done than those on TV. There is a neutrality and respect for the interviewee’s speaking time which should be normal in journalism today but isn’t. Bravo!”²⁰, which received over four thousand likes. These comments give an idea of the response to Decrypte’s own political participation, connection, and collaboration: they are not concerned with the content but the format.

A deeper look into word frequency shows exactly what is being discussed in the video. In the 400 comments observed, the word ‘*format*’ appears 93 times, ‘*programme*’ 40, and ‘*idées*’ 35. ‘*Neutralité*’ and other related words such as “*neutre*” appear 48 times. Words such as *voile*, *Islam*, *impot*, and *guerre*²¹ which were hot topics during the election and interview are not mentioned. The closest comments tend to get to an actual stance and are typically much less aggressive in their support. User @eiboneb5480 comments “Frankly, it is good to see this angle. Even though I don’t think I’ll vote for her, it’s clear that her program has interesting ideas, and this interview is far from the media’s cockfights, this lets us get to

¹⁹ “Ce qui est génial sur les interviews de cette chaîne c'est que, contrairement à la télé, il n'y a pas de coupage de parole et tous le monde ne parle pas en même temps ! Respect pour tout votre travail, continuez ainsi!”

²⁰ “Je suis choqué de la qualité de ces interviews qui sont objectivement mieux réalisées que celles à la télévision. Il y a une neutralité et un temps de parole respectés, ce qui devrait être normal dans le journalisme mais a tendance à disparaître aujourd'hui, bravo !”

²¹ In order “format” “program” “ideas” “neutrality” “neutral” “headscarf” “islam” “tax” “war”

know the candidate better²²”(@eiboneb5480). Even here one can see that despite not liking Le Pen, the user does not take time to express their presumably negative opinions on her campaign. The only thing that is mentioned explicitly as negative is ‘the media’ or the traditional institutions of political media in France. @lefoutugrec1766 concurs with the critique of the media writing:

“An ‘amateur’ like you makes far more neutral political interviews than those of the big media companies (public services too!) combined. You can be proud of yourself. We often say the internet is the realm of fighting and searching for buzz, but the same Interview of Le Pen at France Inter par Salamé²³ would have turned into a trial (as usual).²⁴” (@lefoutugrec1766)

This user goes even further into their support for Le Pen by referencing how they believe other news organizations treat Le Pen in an accusatory trial-like manner, as well as reaffirming the idea that big media companies and traditional political media are less neutral than Decrypte’s channel. This support for Marine Le Pen is also noticeably presented not as anti-left wing — but anti-establishment — again emphasizing French youth’s desire to see the media landscape change..

Just as Decrypte’s channel replaces traditional media, the comment section replaces the public square or the op-ed. The comment section should not be viewed as a collection of comments on the video but as comments surrounding whatever topic is discussed in the video. Comments are instead a way for each person to express their opinion in the public forum. For French youth who may feel ignored by institutions, a comment section where one

²² “Franchement ça fait du bien de pouvoir la voir sous cet angle là. Même je ne pense pas voter pour elle, mais il est clair que son programme propose des idées intéressantes et loin de combats de coqs médiatiques on permet de connaître mieux le candidat.”

²³Lea Salamé is a french journalist. Salamé claims to be neither left nor right wing.

²⁴ “Un "amateur" comme toi produit des interviews politiques infiniment plus neutre que toutes celles des grands médias (services publics inclus !) réunis. Tu peux être fier de toi. On dit souvent qu'Internet est le royaume du clash et de la recherche du buzz, pourtant, la même Interview de Lepen chez France Inter par Salamé aurait tourné au procès(comme d'habitude).”

can connect and discuss with peers is the most accessible form of political participation. Comment sections also allow for near-instant feedback, whether it be via liking a comment one agrees with or by replying to a comment for a more personal response. In the comments, the word first-person pronouns *je* and *j'* 76 appear 309 times. These comments are not all simple messages of support or slogans. Many of them are a way for youths to signal their own opinions — especially when they feel as though this is a space where they can be heard and listened to.

Compare this with comments left on two other mainstream news organizations: *Touche pas à mon poste!* and BFMTV. *Touche pas à mon poste !* is a political program focusing on debates and interviews with political figures and speakers hosted and created by Cyril Hanouna, a 49-year-old French-Tunisian media personality. It originally aired on the public France 4 channel. BFMTV is the most viewed news channel in France and is privately owned by Altice Média, a mass media company (Goodfellow 2023). While *Touche pas à mon poste!* and BFMTV air on television where their primary viewership resides, their YouTube channels have 2.2 and 1.7 million subscribers respectively. Both *Touche pas à mon poste!* and BFMTV are primarily viewed on air, which means that their video on YouTube with a comment section is not always the first place audiences would view the clips posted (unlike Decrypte's). These organizations are both French TV giants and due to their massive TV audience, YouTube is their secondary audience. The viewership of these channels is far more diverse than Decryptes due to their notoriety for bringing in wider audiences as well as being made for the general adult population and public instead of just youth.

In these comments, the responses can be quite shorter than their Decrypte video counterparts. In the video “Marine Le Pen looks back on her career on *Face a Baba*” the comments are in full support of Marine Le Pen and express this belief unequivocally: “My

vote for Marine!”, “We love you, Marine!!!”, and “GO Marine!”²⁵. Similarly, in a BFMTV video “In Front of BFM Presidential 2022 - Jean Luc Mélenchon” — a two-hour interview of the candidate — the comments also ignore the format, nor do they speak about media trustworthiness. The comments instead affirm support for his positions, writing; “Excellent speaker. He answered everything. The only charismatic man to aspire to the supreme legislator.”, “With this program, this man should be the new president without a problem, his humanity, his repartee, his knowledge of the issues. Get out and vote for change.”, and “The grand Mélenchon! Move towards democracy, environmentalism, and justice; social, fiscal, and international!”²⁶(@aminzaydi6329 ; @54kellyj ; @PM-cl5lx). These comments share in being sincere and avoiding sarcasm or irony with those seen previously, yet both of these comment sections display far more support for candidates than the comments seen on Decrypte’s videos.

Despite the differences between the two news giants, they each lack the sense of online community created in Decrypte’s work. Within that online community, commenters feel seen and heard enough to comment their own opinions on the videos and issues to a personal extent. Without any form of discussion encouraged (functioning more as an archive for television), the videos from *Touche pas à mon poste!* and BFMTV do not spark the same collaboration and connection. This results in comments being much simpler and concise, unlike comment sections of YouTube videos. ‘YouTube videos’ are specifically made for the platform and a community on YouTube, whereas a video simply uploaded to YouTube may not have been designed for YouTube and may be for any and all audiences. In both of these comment sections of traditional media, we can see far more engagement with the ideas

²⁵ “Mon vote pour Marine !”, “On vous aime Marine le Pen !!!”, and “ALLEZ marine !!”

²⁶ “Excellent orateur. Il a réponse à tous. Seul homme charismatique à prétendre à la législature suprême” , “Avec son programme ce Mr devrait être le nouveau président sans problème. Le côté humain la répartie qu’il a ,la connaissance des dossiers. Déplacez vous allez voter pour un changement”, and “Du grand Mélenchon ! Go vers la démocratie, l’écologie et la justice sociale, fiscale et internationale !”

presented by the candidates and simple messages of support or affirmation. No comments call into question or praise the trustworthiness of the media, nor do any of them reference themselves in a relevant way.

This all speaks to the political disillusionment which is increasing in France. Often incorrectly attributed to apathy, these comments display great concern towards politics, just through alternate modes. The viewership of Decrypte shows how instead of apathetically ignoring political content or commenting about lack of interest in the subject, youths do want to engage politically — albeit in a different way. French youth, more than ever, are searching for information about the political world around them. They do not trust their old sources to tell them about the world. Journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel refer to this today as the “show me” era of journalism instead of the previous “tell me” era. Instead of looking for media to tell youth what is going on, they simply look for a platform to be shown what is. Kovach and Rosenstiel attribute this to readers being wary of misinformation and living in a time where once ‘trusted sources’ are no longer trusted. Every piece of news must demonstrate its trustworthiness (Kovach 120). The *Generation What* survey of over 320,000 youths found that 87% of those surveyed lacked confidence in the media, with half of those same people — 42% — having no trust at all in the media (Muxel 66). The rejection of traditional political media does not stem from a rejection of political media, but of tradition.

Decrypte’s YouTube channel, which functions similarly to traditional media, additionally incorporates more modern elements to retain young viewers. YouTube videos can be paused, rewatched, and accessed at any time, allowing for longer-form videos to be consumed as the audience wants, whether all at once or piece by piece when one has time. Decrypte makes use of YouTube’s chapter system which allows the video to easily be divided up into sections (based on questions) and be started from any of these chapters. This is in

stark contrast to BFMTV and others' use of town hall format videos. These are broadcast on air for over two hours. The length is often inaccessible for the average viewer to watch completely on air, or even to rewatch the entirety on YouTube at home. This length makes it difficult to use the “show me” style of journalism, which is favored by youths. Despite allowing for more discussion time, these formats can drag on and be unable to retain attention. Decrypte’s 40-minute format is an easily digestible size to view the entirety in one sitting, ensuring that audiences feel as though they can easily be shown the entire interview. This adds to Decrypte’s interview’s appearance of authenticity; apparent authenticity is the key to success. For Decrypte this authenticity is seen in allowing candidates to speak fully and asking questions based on youth opinion polling. These make the interview feel relevant and trustworthy to convey accurate information about the candidate’s goals and the youth’s desires.

Along with rising levels of distrust in government and institutions due to perhaps economic or political reasons, the prevalence of fake news and now AI-generated images and videos lead youth to look for authenticity more; and Decrypte answers that need. It is important to note that Decrypte, unlike a political commentator, tries to avoid being an ideological intermediary in politics by keeping his format and style identical between candidates. Where other influencers or commentators may seek to actively promote ideologies, Decrypte maintains a priority of accurate information before any ideological promotion. He does so by clearly and visually citing his sources, using the sources of information as a jumping-off point. In the Marine Le Pen interview, he uses a survey of 500 youths 18-29 about their greatest concerns politically, which is displayed on a large screen between them. After it is revealed that environmentalism is a top issue, Decrypte uses this information as a starting point to ask Le Pen why on her website words like environment, climate, and biodiversity do not appear. Without implying that Le Pen does not care about the

issue of the environment, he then simply asks why these words are missing. In doing so he lets Le Pen share her views on the issue without assigning morality to her stance or the issue.

These findings are not limited to Marine Le Pen’s interview video, though it may be perhaps the most striking example. While Le Pen was less popular with youth, comments under videos of popular youth candidates like Jean-Luc Mélenchon also commented on format instead of content. Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the third candidate in the 2022 presidential election, losing out to Marine Le Pen by only 1% of the first-round vote (Ministre de l'Intérieur) Mélenchon’s campaign relied more heavily on social media and young people than the other candidates leading to him being known as the social media candidate. In his video with Decrypte in the same format, the comments begin in much the same way (*Decrypte Jean-Luc Mélenchon: L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)*). One comment repeats the sentiments seen in Marine Le Pen’s interview: “Thank you, Hugo, for doing real informative work and asking the questions about their program and letting candidates go into them. It’s what’s missing more and more from the world of media today!”²⁷(@ALeaumenton). The next comment speaks slightly more about Mélenchon himself, yet also excludes any mention of his ideas or plans:

“The most important point I took away from this interview: Mélenchon is the first candidate to really explain his campaign without going around in circles. He isn’t concerned with taking shots at other candidates to show his own merit. This is the most enjoyable interview, thanks!”²⁸ (@solenebernard4323).

²⁷“Merci Hugo de faire un vrai travail d'information en posant des questions de fond sur le programme et en permettant aux candidats de développer. C'est ce qui manque le plus au monde médiatique d'aujourd'hui !”

²⁸ “Le point le plus important que je retiens de cette itw : Mélenchon est le 1er candidat qui a réellement expliqué son programme sans tourner au tour de pot. Il ne s'est pas amusé à taper sur les doigts des autres candidats sans cesse pour se faire valoir. C'était l'itw la plus agréable, merci beaucoup !”

The rest of the comments proceed generally to discuss Mélenchon's performance in the interview. These comments also show more curiosity and intrigue into his campaign versus Marine Le Pen's. One comment wrote "Thank you for showing the real side of JLM, the traditional media sell an image of him that he is not. Opinion loses itself in the false, I don't agree with everything in his program, but he seems like the most realistic and just."²⁹(@Ginkorobour27). Another comment responds complementarity to Mélenchon and recommends viewers do further research on Mélenchon's program telling youth to watch the debate hosted on the TF1 TV network about the retirement age (Mélenchon promoting a 60-year-old retirement age and Macron a 65-year-old retirement age).

These comments, combined with those from Marine Le Pen's interview, display the same desire to see the candidate instead of hear about them. French youth do not trust the traditional institutions of media or politics and need to see the candidate they will vote for; this 40-minute format is where they see that. This is not to say that French youth are completely ignoring all policies when commenting, connecting, and participating in politics online. @aureliasola5516 wrote in a comment underneath Decypte's video with Mélenchon:

"I know that it's not possible to cover everything, but I think it's unfortunate to not speak about the billions he wants to put in place to against violence against women and sexual violence. He is the only candidate to talk about it, so it would be interesting to see what he has to say. And it could show women that this is a political issue that we can act on!"³⁰(@aureliesola5516)

²⁹ "Merci de montrer le vrai visage de JLM, les médias classiques nous vendent une personne qu'il n'est pas. L'opinion se perd dans de faux problème, je ne suis pas d'accord avec tout son programmes mais il me semble être le plus réaliste et le plus juste."

³⁰ "Je sais que c'est pas possible de tout aborder, mais je trouve ça dommage de pas parler du milliard qu'il souhaite mettre en place pour lutter contre les violences sexistes et sexuelles. C'est le seul candidat à en parler, donc ça aurait été intéressant de voir ce qu'il avait à dire dessus. Et ça aurait pu montrer aux femmes que ce sujet est politique et que l'on peut agir dessus !"

This is a clear example of a comment that actively engages with the content of the interview, displays knowledge of Mélenchon's campaign, and promotes political activism. It goes to show that traditional political participation is not the only way to gauge political participation in the modern world. Other commenters mention their support for Mélenchon based on his ideas about the workforce and work-life balance: "Finally a program with a candidate with whom one feels seen as human and not as a slave to work until death with the others"³¹ (@nellyg1123). As seen in the Generation What survey 59% of youth report feeling as though their efforts in their work are not valued as they should be. This would prove to be a key issue the following year, one that would mobilize youth into political action beyond the polls and election cycle.

Can this online political engagement be seen in offline political participation? In many ways it can, but not in one of the most basic and common forms of offline political participation: the vote. The involvement in political commentary online contrasts starkly with voting patterns in France, which have seen an increase in voter abstention (Vaudano 2022). Voting, the perhaps most obvious form of political participation in a democracy, has seen an increasing decline in recent years. The 2022 election's first round showed the second highest abstention rate since 1965 with over a quarter of the electorate abstaining. This figure then increased to 28% during the second round. When looking at the causes, according to the Public Institute of Opinion Polling. The high rates of abstention stem mostly from youths. 42% of youths eighteen to twenty-four years old and 46% percent of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds abstained, nearly double if not more than any other age group. Another poll by the Institut Montaigne, a nonprofit think tank in Paris, found that when surveying youth eighteen to twenty-four, 34% of them believed that voting doesn't serve much purpose as the politicians they vote for do not take into account the will of the people. Only about

³¹"Enfin un programme avec candidat avec lequel on a l'impression de compter en tant qu'humain et non comme un esclave bon à travailler jusqu'à la mort avec les autres."

thirteen percent of youth actively worked in political organizations, and of those who did roughly half dropped out claiming that it no longer interested them afterwards (Muxel 66). Over half did not feel close to any political party, instead basing their politics on issues such as environmentalism, violence against women, and inequality (Lazar 2022).

Marie Mairot, a political science student at the Université Vincennes - Saint-Denis, says the most important pertinent issue for her was the retirement age reform being proposed: “I think of the debate around the reform of the retirement age. It was a crazy thing, super important to talk about.” The debate in France at the time of the election varied wildly, from candidates proposing to remove two years from the retirement age to others proposing adding three. “I’d like France to leave behind its idea of universalism and I think that equity is more important than equality. [I’d like] also that France understands that this is a multicultural society, that assimilation is pointless and that communities are necessary [...] Altogether, I would say anti-racism and intersectional feminism [are my biggest political motivators]”³² says Alice Aguila, a 29-year-old teacher who works in Paris with foreign youth. Both womens’ concerns mirrored concerns seen ranking high in polls on key issues.

The comments on these videos mirror what the opinion surveys show. Again, @aureliasola5516 mentions on Decrypte’s video her support for Mélenchon due to his stance on violence against women and this mirrors what the results from the Institut Montaigne poll show. French sociologist Olivier Galland notes that violence against women is a key issue that youths will want to act on politically in an interview with the newspaper *Les Echos* (Corbier 2022). @aureliasola5516 is not alone in her belief: “Basically, I didn’t count on voting for Mélenchon but as time goes on, I realize that his is the only coherent program which primarily focuses on social issues, women’s issues, and environmentalism.”

³² “J’aimerais que la France abandonne son idée d’universalisme et que l’équité est plus importante que l’égalité. Aussi qu’elle comprenne qu’on est dans une société multiculturelle, que l’assimilation ne sert à rien et que les communautés sont nécessaires [...] pour résumer je dirais l’antiracisme et le féminisme intersectionnel”

@gabgaby999 concurs in another comment. Mélenchon was able to take his campaign to third place by his campaign plan of focusing on the concerns of the youth voting bloc, however, this could have backfired — when considering that youth also had the greatest abstention rates.

In French politics, not voting can be just as much of a vote as voting. Between the first and second-round of voting, blank votes increased from 1.12% to 4.58%, and abstention went from 26.31% to 28.01% (Ministère de l'Intérieur 2022). The threefold increase in blank votes is much more notable and suggests that the increase in blank votes may stem from the narrowing of candidate choices from the twelve first-round candidates to the two second-round candidates. This could be heightened especially when a popular candidate like Mélenchon loses by 0.87% of the vote. Blank votes in French elections are another form of abstention, but it is far more direct. Where abstention is the simple act of not voting and casting no ballot, a blank vote is the act of voting for nothing on purpose while casting a ballot. While both of these have the same effect and do not influence the election results (the system functions in a binary where a candidate must win, and it is impossible to not elect a president), the motivation behind a blank vote is certain to signify protest or dissatisfaction with the system — whereas no such motivations can be inferred from abstention. Muxel therefore divides abstentionists into two categories: 'inside the game' and 'outside the game' abstentionists, which refer to the motivation behind abstention being due to political motivation or political apathy (Muxel 43-55). In an Ipsos & Sopra poll of 4000 French adults registered on electoral lists constituting a representative sample of the general French voting population: 41% of the Mélenchon voters could be divided into 24% abstentionists and 17% blank voters. Yannick Jadot, another far less popular and environmentalist candidate, saw a similar divide between 16% and 13% respectively (Teinturier 2022).

In roughly half of the cases above it can be observed that voting and abstaining are both forms of political participation. To view an increase in youth abstention from voting as an increase in abstention from politics as a whole is incorrect. One year after his election, President Emmanuel Macron used Article 49.3 of the French Constitution to bypass voting and increase the retirement age in the country from 62 to 64. This move was met with fierce backlash from both the far-left and the far-right parties of the parliament. More importantly, it was met with fiercer backlash from the French public. Led by the *l'Intersyndicale*, or inter-union group, this set off a series of strikes lasting from January to June. These strikes were highly organized with well-established days of strikes being planned. While older people in the workforce participated in these strikes by service workers refusing to operate the Paris metro system or sanitation workers refusing to collect trash, younger people engaged in *blocages*. *Blocages* — or blockages in English — typically involve mass amounts of students working together to block university entrances effectively canceling all operations that day including classes.



Figure 2: Michel Euler via Associated Press

According to the UNEF (*Union Nationale des Etudiants de France*), 500,000 students were mobilized in protest and shut down 80 universities during the March 23rd Day of strikes (Union Nationale des Etudiants de France). Isabelle Sommier, a sociology professor at University Pantheon-Sorbonne Paris 1, stated that young people were “following a collective dynamic of rage against the political powers of the government.”³³ The deputy of the French democratic socialist party acknowledged the importance of the youth as well saying that it’s the youth who will succeed in downing this reform (LOEK).

French youth are motivated politically — to the point of mass demonstration and protest — despite what voting trends may appear to show. As seen previously, Mélenchon’s proposition for a 60-year-old age of retirement was an issue that mobilized the youth to support him. This can also be seen as an indication that it is an issue that would mobilize youth regardless; one year later Macron raised the retirement age by only two years and millions of youth along with the rest of the country went on strike for half a year. The issues that will lead to strikes and protests can be seen brewing in the comment sections of YouTube the same way they could have been heard murmuring in the bars and cafes of decades past.

³³ “*suivant une dynamique collective de rage contre le pouvoir politique.*”

Conclusion

French youth use the online space as the default space for political discussion and information. It is used as a means to receive, spread, and connect with differing political ideas. Their primary focus is to find trustworthy information that shows them the state of the world and provides neutral information on each side of key debates. French youth use the comment sections of videos as discussion grounds where they can each share their ideas and echo those that they concur with. Despite the lack of equal airtime laws online like those that apply to French radio and TV, the demand for balanced airtime and its implied neutrality continues to motivate and attract both young influencers and their audiences. These comment sections also serve as microcosms of youth groups and their ideas. More so than any physical location of the past, the online comment section offers a space where one can truly observe the conversation surrounding national elections. It is evident that despite the decreasing numbers of youth taking to the polls, there is an increasing number of youth that are taking to the streets in protest when they feel motivated. The youth of France want to see change in their government and their future and are ready to go to great lengths for it. The online comment section provides a complex study of their motivations and what they mean for the future.

For a larger project, researchers would do well to compare this election to previous elections, most obviously the 2017 election. This election was a huge departure from the norm as the two traditionally dominant French political parties lost. Two new candidates brought their respective centrist and far-right parties to the forefront. It should be examined how youth online reacted to that election cycle as two new frontrunners emerged, as well as if their support was indicative of this change. This, if also done during the 2027 election, could allow researchers to analyze trends from all three elections and see what the overall political

trends and norms of the nation are. To better understand the full extent of how these comment sections operate, a more robust analysis of all comments would provide a clearer idea of the general attitude and disposition of the comment section. This comment section could also be analyzed by AI tools to notice sarcasm, dog whistles, and other more complicated sentences to confirm the attitude of the commenters. While it was noted that most comments appeared to be matter-of-fact, this analysis could confirm the commonality (or lack thereof) of sarcasm in comment sections like these.

Repeated studies in this format done on each future election will provide relevant information as to which social issues will continue to motivate participation in France's political world, both in voting and real life. Future research may also want to examine older generations who use the internet to receive their political information and whether or not they use it in the same social fashion. This could also be examined in other countries to see what comment sections may look like in other political cultures such as the United States and South Korea. These findings would be essential for helping to understand the next generation of citizens of a country and what their motivations are and their future actions will be.

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@monsieurmuerte comment on *Marine Le Pen : L’interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* YouTube, 27 Feb 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

@_tonico comment on *Marine Le Pen : L’interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* YouTube, 27 Feb 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

@eiboneb5480 comment on *Marine Le Pen : L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* YouTube, 27 Feb 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

@lefoutugrec1766 comment on *Marine Le Pen : L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* YouTube, 27 Feb 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

@saintsauveur8030 comment on *Marine Le Pen revient sur son parcours dans Face à Baba.* YouTube, 26 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKXQKmfRIU>

@maxenceledrogo3439 comment on *Marine Le Pen revient sur son parcours dans Face à Baba.* YouTube, 26 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKXQKmfRIU>

@JoaoSilva-qq5yh comment on *Marine Le Pen revient sur son parcours dans Face à Baba.* YouTube, 26 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKXQKmfRIU>

@aminzaydi6329 comment on *Face à BFM Présidentielle 2022 – Jean-Luc Mélenchon* YouTube, 9 December 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw_jNwfeFQ4

@54kellyj comment on *Face à BFM Présidentielle 2022 – Jean-Luc Mélenchon* YouTube, 9 December 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw_jNwfeFQ4

@PM-cl5lx comment on *Face à BFM Présidentielle 2022 – Jean-Luc Mélenchon* YouTube, 9 December 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw_jNwfeFQ4

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@ALeument comment on *Jean-Luc Mélenchon: L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* 13 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqYezph-hgg>

@solenebernard4323 comment on *Jean-Luc Mélenchon: L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* 13 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqYezph-hgg>

@GinkgoRobur27 comment on *Jean-Luc Mélenchon: L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)* 13 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqYezph-hgg>

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Union Nationale des Etudiants de France [@UNEF] "[Communiqué de presse] Plus de 500 000 jeunes se sont mobilisés et environ 80 établissements universitaires ont été bloqués partout en France hier pour dire NON à la #ReformeDesRetraites On continue tout le week-end et rdv le 28mars dans la rue !" X 24 March 2023
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Appendix

A. Comments

Decrypte, Hugo. “Marine Le Pen: L'interview face cachée” YouTube uploaded by HugoDécrypte - Grands formats , 27 February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

@monsieurmuerte: “Ce qui est génial sur les interviews de cette chaîne c'est que, contrairement à la télé, il n'y a pas de coupage de parole et tous le monde ne parle pas en même temps ! Respect pour tout votre travail, continuez ainsi !” 1,200 likes

@_tonico Je suis choqué de la qualité de ces interviews qui sont objectivement mieux réalisées que celles à la télévision. Il y a une neutralité et un temps de parole respectés, ce qui devrait être normal dans le journalisme mais a tendance à disparaître aujourd'hui, bravo! 4,400 likes

@eiboneb5480 “Franchement ça fait du bien de pouvoir la voir sous cet angle là. Même je ne pense pas voter pour elle, mais il est clair que son programme propose des idées intéressantes et loin de combats de coqs médiatiques on permet de connaître mieux le candidat.” 257 likes

@lefoutugrec1766 “Un "amateur" comme toi produit des interviews politiques infiniment plus neutre que toutes celles des grands médias (services publics inclus !) réunis. Tu peux être fier de toi. On dit souvent qu'Internet est le royaume du clash et de la recherche du buzz, pourtant, la même Interview de Le Pen chez France Inter par Salamé aurait tourné au procès(comme d'habitude).” 1,700 likes

BFMTV “Face à BFM Présidentielle 2022 – Jean-Luc Mélenchon” YouTube uploaded by BFMTV, 9 December 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw_jNwfeFQ4

@aminzaydi6329: “Excellent orateur. Il a réponse à tous. Seul homme charismatique à prétendre à la législature suprême”

@54kellyj: “Avec son programme ce Mr devrait être le nouveau président sans problème. Le côté humain la répartie qu'il a ,la connaissance des dossiers. Déplacez vous allez voter pour un changement”

@PM-cl5lx: “Du grand Mélenchon ! Go vers la démocratie, l'écologie et la justice sociale, fiscale et internationale !”

Touche pas à mon poste ! “Marine Le Pen revient sur son parcours dans Face à Baba.” YouTube uploaded by Touche pas à mon poste !, 26 March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKXQKmfRIU>

@saintsauveur8030: “Mon vote pour Marine !”

@maxenceledrogo3439: “On vous aime Marine le Pen !!!”

@JoaoSilva-qq5yh: “ALLEZ marine !!!”

Decrypte, Hugo. “Jean-Luc Mélenchon: L'interview face cachée (Présidentielle 2022)” YouTube uploaded by HugoDécrypte - Grands formats, 13 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqYezph-hgg>

@ALeument: “Merci Hugo de faire un vrai travail d'information en posant des questions de fond sur le programme et en permettant aux candidats de développer. C'est ce qui manque le plus au monde médiatique d'aujourd'hui !” 3400 likes

@solenebernard4323: “Le point le plus important que je retiens de cette itw : Melenchon est le 1er candidat qui a réellement expliqué son programme sans tourner au tour de pot. Il ne s'est pas amusé à taper sur les doigts des autres candidats sans cesse pour se faire valoir. C'était l'itw la plus agréable, merci beaucoup !” 2900 likes

@GinkgoRobur27: “Merci de montrer le vrai visage de JLM, les médias classiques nous vendent une personne qu'il n'est pas. L'opinion se perd dans de faux problème, je ne suis pas d'accord avec tout son programmes mais il me semble être le plus réaliste et le plus juste. Big up Jean-Luc” 496 likes

B. Voyant Results Page

Decrypte, Hugo. “Marine Le Pen: L'interview face cachée” YouTube uploaded by HugoDécrypte - Grands formats , 27 Feburary 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMpqr78v14>

			Term	Count	Trend
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	merci*	137	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	format	93	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	neu*	48	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	idée*	48	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	programme	40	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6	idée	13	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	7	voile*	0	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	8	islam*	0	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	9	impot	0	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10	guerre*	0	
			Term	Count	Trend
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	je*	233	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	j'*	76	