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INTRODUCTION: POPULIST STYLE AND PERFORMANCES OF THE FAR RIGHT

Do you remember what you were doing when you learned that Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America on 8 November 2016? After months following a campaign more surreal than any I had watched before and consulting countless polls that predicted Hillary Clinton as the winner, Trump's victory felt preposterous. Given the never-ending stream of live reactions on my phone, it seemed that I was far from the only one, as pundits and experts everywhere seemed to share my astonishment. Of course, American citizens were most directly impacted by the result, but Trump's election was one of those historical events whose ripples extend way further than the confines of the country where they took place. During the months that followed, Donald Trump became the most talked about politician on the planet.

After a presidential term that was just as chaotic and shocking as his campaign had been, Trump's defeat against Joe Biden at the following presidential elections in 2020 seemed to mark a form of return to normality. Trump would end up in the history books as an embarrassing mistake, a one-off anomaly that remained constrained by the solidity of the American political institutions. And while the assault of the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021, for which he has been indicted for incitement of insurrection, demonstrated the violence of the threat that Trump had fostered, it also appeared like the last nail in the coffin of his political career. Surely, no former president could ever entertain the hope of being re-elected after an event like this, after facing four indictments at both the federal and state level for nearly one hundred felony

charges. But Trump's resilience continues to shock and surprise, every criminal accusation framed as one more proof of the conspiracy of the elite against him and reinforcing the zeal of his supporters. As of the time where these lines are written, in the early months of 2024, Trump seems well on track to win the Republican primaries once more and is heading towards a second duel against outgoing president Joe Biden. While this book does not claim to make predictions about what is going to happen in late 2024, it instead offers to go back to the roots of the Trump phenomenon by examining the 2016 presidential campaign and framing his surprising victory as part of a larger conversation on far-right politics, representation and populism in Western countries.

There were indeed many factors accounting for the surprise around Trump's victory, most notably the oddities of the indirect system of presidential election in the United States (which allowed Trump to win despite losing the popular vote by nearly three million votes) or shortcomings in polling methods (Kennedy et al. 2018). But outside of technical considerations, what made this election result so remarkable largely had to do with its victor, Donald Trump, who had run one of the most abrasive campaigns in the history of the country. Focusing on 'law and order', economic protectionism and a xenophobic form of nationalism, Trump's agenda did not drastically differ from that of other Republican candidates. Rather, Trump stood out from his peers for reasons beyond the measures he advocated. Building on the image of a successful businessman he had honed over fourteen years starring in the reality television show *The Apprentice*, Trump entered the campaign as an outsider seeking to 'drain the swamp'. His campaign quickly became characterised by the repeated transgressions of political norms, from his egregious lies (Pfiffner 2020) to the use of demeaning nicknames for his rivals (Quealy 2021). Framing himself as the leader of a movement that would save the American people from a discredited elite, Trump was quickly described as a populist (Norris and Inglehart 2016; Ostiguy and Roberts 2016), with all the negative undertones associated with the term. And conversely, as Trump became synonymous with populism, the opposite also became true as the 45th president became the face of a new wave of populism, a concept with a much longer history going back to agrarian movements of the nineteenth century, but which had since then undergone a drastic 'semantic drift' (Jäger 2017) which will be discussed later.

Fast-forward nearly six months after Trump's election, to 23 April 2017, the day of the first round of the French presidential election, where Marine Le Pen, leader of the then *Front National* (FN),[1] reached second place with 21.30 per cent of the votes in a very close race with three other major candidates. More than beating her own record she had set five years before (17.90 per cent), Le Pen made a historic achievement: the highest electoral result ever for a radical candidate in France. Le Pen thus joined the second round of the election for the second time in the history of her party, following the success

of Jean-Marie Le Pen, her father, in the 2002 elections. However, a major difference between them is that, very much like Trump's victory, her father's qualification to the second round of the election was seen at the time by the political intelligentsia, and the voters more generally, as not only surprising but also shocking. Jean-Marie Le Pen's brand of far-right politics was then framed as a threat to French democracy itself (Stockemer 2017: 23). Massive protests attended by more than a million people were organised, most other candidates reluctantly endorsed Jacques Chirac, the outgoing president, as part of a *front républicain*, and Chirac himself refused to even debate with his adversary.

In contrast, Marine Le Pen's accession to the second round of the election was met with relative indifference. Following years of political normalisation, she and her party steadily gained electoral ground and Le Pen's presence in the second round was widely anticipated by most polls.[2] Although she lost the second round of the election against her centrist rival, Emmanuel Macron, she did not suffer her father's pariah treatment. Protests opposing her were marginal, she faced a weakening 'republican front' – given that she was endorsed by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, another conservative candidate, and that radical-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon refused to endorse either candidate, even though he did endorse Chirac in 2002 – and she faced Macron in the first presidential debate for a far-right candidate in France. In other words, where her father's success in 2002 was inconceivable, Marine Le Pen's rise to the second round encountered few obstacles. Despite her eventual failure at breaking the glass ceiling of the second round of the election, her unprecedented success should not be underestimated. Le Pen also presented herself as an underdog candidate – both respectable and radical – who would save France from a catastrophic situation created by the incompetence of the current elites on immigration and radical Islamism.

Such a type of discourse was of course not a novelty from Le Pen. Building on the legacy that her father had built in his party, and even actively coordinating his last presidential campaign in 2007, Le Pen herself had already campaigned for her first campaign in 2012. But although she had already undertaken the process of normalisation of her party, the agenda she defended was faithful to the fundamentals of the far right (Alduy and Wahnich 2015), which led to a campaign centred around a much more explicitly radical and nationalist line than in 2017. Although this campaign was moderately successful, beating the record established by her father in 2002 in terms of share of the vote (16.86 per cent in 2002 vs 17.90 per cent in 2012), she remained far from her two mainstream rivals, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. As such, this first relative failure was accompanied by an increased focus on the *dédiabolisation* process, a softening in tone and the adoption of a people-centric rhetoric which helped her ground her claims to be 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016). As such, even though Le Pen's steady normalisation sharply contrasted with

Trump's bombastic takeover of the Republican Party, she was also frequently described as a populist (Gross and Lebourg 2016; Ivaldi 2017). And just like him, she also became one of the most prominent faces of populism in Europe (Nossiter 2017) as she particularly stood out as one of the rare female leaders to be described as such (Geva 2019).

My argument in this book is that, despite all their differences and even the apparent contradiction between Trump's outrageous antics and Le Pen's softening rhetoric, the guiding thread uniting these two cases is indeed populism. However, the understanding of populism underpinning my argument is radically different from that of mainstream analysts given that, building on Moffitt's (2016) approach, I define populism as a political style. In this introduction, I will firstly provide an overview of the rationale behind this choice for a critical and interdisciplinary approach to populism. Secondly, I will justify my choice of a comparative research design to engage with the populist style and the reasons why I selected Le Pen and Trump to develop this comparison. Thirdly, I will defend the focus on presidential elections and introduce more at length the two political actors that constitute the 'cast' of my analysis: Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump. Although I will exclusively engage with their respective campaigns for the 2016 and 2017 presidential elections, these two politicians were far from strangers to the citizens of their countries when they started campaigning. To ground my analysis in the local context and provide a 'thicker' (Geertz 2008) understanding of the events, I will offer a summary of the public life of these politicians prior to their campaigns, detailing crucial elements of background information. Finally, I will detail the structure of this book and provide an outline of the forthcoming chapters.

Populist Style and Performances of the Far Right

While I disagree with many of the reasons underpinning the standard descriptions of Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump as populists, most notably the moralistic judgement and covert accusations of incompetence or demagoguery associated with it, I agree with those scholars that populism played an important role in both of those presidential campaigns. Indeed, despite the differences between those two political actors, I argue that their electoral success was the culmination of two contrasting strategies which both relied on a shared commonality: their use of the populist style. But before developing my definition of populism as a style and how it differs from earlier uses of the concept, let us take one step backward and consider why these two politicians were so deeply associated with it.

Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the concept of populism became so ubiquitous in the mediatic and academic depictions of Trump and Le Pen. Their electoral success deeply resonated with the rising wave of reactionary politicians and nationalist projects across the world, whose most recent success was

the victory of the 'Leave' campaign at the Brexit referendum in June of the same year, sealing the historic departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Dubbed the 'new nationalism' by *The Economist* (2016), this movement became the electorally successful avatar of a deeper change among far-right political actors that modernised their communication to make headways into mainstream political discourse (Winter 2019). Inspired by the theoretical innovations of the French '*Nouvelle Droite*' (Bar-On 2001; Rueda 2021), this modernised far right has developed its presence online while also influencing more traditional political institutions and politicians. Although populism is not directly associated with the more extreme fringes of these far-right movements, it has been used to refer to those political actors adopting the modernised version of far-right politics in an electoral context.

Challenging what they called the 'populist hype', Glynos and Mondon (2016: 13–15) criticised this semantic shift from describing these actors as primarily populist instead of far-right, which downplays their ideology, grants them a veneer of popular legitimacy and further discredits by association any other radical alternative, from the left notably. I do concur with their call to be more cautious and critical about the way populism as a concept and signifier is used in political and academic discourse. However, I argue that, outside of its frequent conflation with the far right and the moral judgement from those who use it, populism does capture a fundamental component of what made these far-right actors successful in their electorally driven endeavours.

In opposition to those who talk about populism as a set of beliefs or ideas (Mudde 2017a; Müller 2016), the perspective adopted in this book is built around the intuition that the nature of populism is fundamentally different from the ideological beliefs to which it gives shape. Starting from the premise that populism is not located at the level of ideational content, I instead argue that it is a matter of political form. Put differently, populism is not about *what* politicians like Le Pen and Trump are saying, it is about *the way* they articulate it. That ontological shift from content to form, from ideology to style, thus implies acknowledging the intrinsically performative and theatrical dimension of populism. As such, adapting and expanding a definition created by Moffitt (2016), I will develop throughout this book an interdisciplinary approach to populism as a political style, that is a repertoire of performative practices that can be strategically mobilised by any political actor to convey their ideological agenda.

Applying it to the aforementioned politicians, such a radical conceptual change means that neither Trump nor Le Pen were inherently populist during their campaigns, as their primary attribute remained their ideological commitment to nationalism, conservatism and so on. Their practices, in other words their political performances, were populist, but it would be misguided to describe them as populist themselves. Although I may occasionally use the

shortcut of 'populist actors' or 'populist politicians', I want to emphasise the importance of dissociating the actor from their actions. This therefore means that it would be more accurate to describe them as politicians who strategically used the populist style to further their agenda.

At its core, the populist style is made of three complementary components: articulating an antagonism between people and elite through a populist leader, transgressing the rules of established politics to stand out from other politicians and developing a crisis narrative of a society under threat. Each of these elements were mobilised in the performances of Le Pen and Trump during their respective campaigns, but what is particularly noteworthy is that they were expressed differently depending on the personal idiosyncrasies of each performer and on the local context. Acknowledging this does not undermine the notion of a unified populist style, but on the contrary showcases the versatility of the concept of style which has both an individual as well as a collective dimension (Aiolfi 2023). Every style holds within itself a 'potential for individualisation'[3] (Bordas 2008: 220), which explains how, within the same repertoire of the populist style, each political actor will imprint it with their own idiosyncrasies. Thus, before expanding on these specificities of the populist style, how they were chosen and the implications of adopting this approach to populism, which will be the purpose of Chapter 2, I will develop the rationale behind the choice of a comparative case study between Trump and Le Pen.

Comparative Research Design and Case Selection

When it comes to research design, the most important epistemological premise to acknowledge is that this book is located within a post-positivist and interpretive framework. I am sceptical of any epistemological stance aspiring to reach objectivity and accept instead that 'the production of knowledge is itself also and simultaneously productive of the world' (Jackson 2011: 114). In opposition to the positivist quest for causality, objective explanations for why a phenomenon happens, or generalisability, the universal application of a claim to all cases, contextualisation is one of the guiding principles of interpretive research. Interpretive research is based on the idea that meaning-making is necessarily contingent and subject to interpretation. As such, the quality of post-positivist research depends on whether it is 'sufficiently contextualized so that the interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013: 47). In consequence, instead of attempting to isolate a specific variable whose value would differ between cases, a comparative analysis grounded in an interpretive inquiry will provide a 'thick description' (Geertz 2008) of the differing aspects of the phenomenon at hand by highlighting context-specific variations of two closely related cases.

More generally, qualitative methods are much more adapted to the level of details in interpretive research than quantitative methods. However, as opposed

to a single case study, I chose to introduce a comparative dimension to this work by contrasting two case studies to explore the differences in the way the populist style is expressed across two contexts to develop a better understanding of its specificities. Indeed, exploring the interaction between form and content implies facing the issue that both are deeply entangled, which is reflected in the literature on populism by the frequent conflation between populism and nationalism (De Cleen 2017). As such, a comparative research design is particularly helpful in providing different examples of the way ideology, style and context are interconnected, which can highlight specific points of entanglement that might be absent or expressed differently in the other case.

Comparative research in its most general understanding is about choosing cases that share important similar features but also substantial differences in the aspect of the phenomenon that is explored (Halperin and Heath 2016: 209). Mill (2002) distinguished two types of comparative endeavours: those focused on very different cases to highlight their similarities, called method of agreement, and those focused on comparing cases that share central similarities to highlight their divergences, called method of difference. This book adopts a research design based on the latter, a method of difference, focusing on three central similarities between cases. First, the ideological agenda of the political actors which is characterised by social conservatism, economic protectionism and exclusionary nationalism. This places them on the far right, or more precisely on the radical right.[4] Second, the political and institutional context of the campaigns: Western liberal democracies with a strong presidential component during a relatively similar electoral context, that of presidential elections. Third, the presence of populism, which was commonly highlighted in the literature. Even before I adopted the approach to populism as a style, my initial intent was to better understand the recurrent relationship between far-right politicians, like Le Pen and Trump, and populism, with which they were systematically associated.

I chose in this book to focus on the specific interaction between populism and far-right ideology, rather than comparing how it interacts with other ideologies to offer a nuanced analysis of the different ways populism gives shape to the same content. As my earlier description of the elections in the United States and France hinted at, there were notable discrepancies between the way Trump and Le Pen led their respective campaigns. These differences are precisely what a comparative research design seeks to capture. The decision to explore right-wing uses of populism particularly stemmed from the streak of successful electoral results from the aforementioned wave of politicians from this 'new nationalism'. Their relative success in the 2010s led to an upsurge of contributions to the academic debate on populism (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), which was also echoed by a dramatic increase of the presence of the concept in the media (Krämer and Holtz-Bacha 2020). More specifically, the

frequent misuse of populism as a euphemistic synonym for radical-right politics (Glynos and Mondon 2016) was also an important factor in undertaking such a research project which hopes to clarify the relationship, interconnections and divergences between the two concepts.

Of course, populism has not been solely linked to nationalist politics, as it has been associated with socialist parties like *Podemos* (Kioupkiolis 2016) and *Syriza* (Katsambekis 2016) or even more ideologically ambiguous movements like the *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy (Lanzone 2014; Ivaldi et al. 2017). Undoubtedly, these other cases have also contributed to the rise in popularity of the concept and a comparative work incorporating the left-wing counterparts to Le Pen and Trump, respectively Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Bernie Sanders, would be another stimulating project. I, however, chose in this book to maintain my focus on the intersection between populism and the far right for several reasons. Firstly, a comparison between four politicians would have been substantially more challenging to implement, and I preferred to maintain a consistent level of 'thickness' in the analysis for both politicians. Secondly, both Le Pen and Trump crossed electoral hurdles that their left-wing counterparts did not, respectively reaching the second round of the election and not only winning a primary but also the whole election. This made the success of these right-wing politicians even more noteworthy. Thirdly, to be fully reflexive about my own biases as a left-leaning researcher, one of my purposes for this project was to gain a better understanding of the appeal of these far-right politicians whose electoral success puzzled so many experts on the left and the centre. Merely condemning them on moral grounds as demagogues is intellectually unsatisfying, which also reinforced my conviction in the importance of thoroughly investigating their cases.

These two specific case studies were also chosen through a combination of general and comparative factors. In 2016, Trump became the new face of populism through his surprising election to the highest office in the most powerful country in the world, which was on its own an extremely symbolic event that demonstrated the electoral power of this new wave of far-right politicians. But outside of symbolism, his presidency also had very material consequences for not only American citizens, but also for the many countries in the world relying on the United States for economic trade, military protection, and more generally political leadership. This made Trump by far the most visible example of a far-right politician whose populist style had led to electoral success. By contrast, Le Pen did not reach the same level of success that Trump did. However, she remained one of the only examples of far-right politicians who succeeded in enabling a marginal party to achieve mainstream acceptance without altering its ideological core (Bastow 2018). Compared to Trump's abrupt takeover of the Republican Party, Le Pen's rise to political prominence has been steady but uninterrupted since she inherited the *Front National* from her father in 2011. Slowly eroding most of the

symbolic stigma and electoral hurdles that hindered her party, Le Pen brought to fruition a strategy of *dédiabolisation* (de-demonisation) which consisted of preserving most of the ideology of her party while changing its style by cleansing it of any overt form of racism and anti-Semitism. Her repeated electoral successes since she became the president of her party, as well as her unusual position as a female leader, gave Le Pen a prominent place as one of the most successful 'populists' in European politics and beyond.

Setting the Stage and Introducing the Cast

I have chosen for this book to analyse the campaigns of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, which started more than a year before the day of the election. This notably allowed me to delineate a timeframe within which specific political performances, like rallies or debates, could be isolated. But outside of this pragmatic consideration, the choice to focus on presidential elections also had theoretical reasons. Elections are a crucial time for democratic politics as they represent the symbolic moment where the power that was endowed to the political representatives is temporarily given back to the electors among which new representatives will emerge. As such, they open a field of possibilities and represent a unique time for politicians to establish or renew a direct link with their audiences. Furthermore, in presidential regimes like France and the United States, the presidential election also holds special significance as the citizens elect *the* person that will figuratively represent their country, acting as a symbolic embodiment of the will of their fellow citizens for several years. In other words, candidates for a presidential election make what Saward (2010) called a 'representative claim', a performative claim to have the legitimacy to represent their fellow citizens in a way that will convince a majority of the electorate. This electoral stage thus makes a presidential campaign particularly tailored to the analysis of individual political leaders. Although supported by a group of people assisting them, politicians act as both the figureheads, lead speakers and main proponents of their representative claim. All in all, presidential campaigns are unique opportunities wherein politicians openly expose themselves and their political convictions to public scrutiny within a legally and symbolically codified context. In other words, they constitute the 'rhetorical and symbolic arena in which voters and candidates participate ritually in the complexities of the presidential struggle for power' (McLeod 1999: 360).

While I will justify more thoroughly the theoretical reasons to focus on political leaders and not on movements or parties in Chapter 2, it is important prior to any analysis to acknowledge that politicians are actors both in the theatrical and political sense of the term. What that means for this research project is that politicians are performers whose actions are shaped and constrained by wider social structures. But, as they navigate the 'background symbols' (Alexander 2006: 58) of their society, they retain a form of agency: they are capable

of strategically choosing which one to mobilise in their discourse and for which purpose. However, unlike actors in a play or movie who step out of the role after the performance ends, their performance is not limited to public events. Hence, this blurs the line between public and private life, what Goffman (1959) respectively called the front and the backstage, which are deeply intertwined in the case of a political actor. As a result, the *persona* – the public image – of a politician is a central component of their campaigns, which encourages personal identification from the audience. In addition to this, it is important to point out that politicians do not start their campaign as unknown entities, they are already associated in the audience's mind with their prior image. Consequently, to provide some crucial background information about them and a description of what their *persona* was at the start of their campaigns, I will introduce the 'cast' of this book through a critical biography which seeks to provide a contextual basis to better understand the journey of these two political actors.

Marine Le Pen

The youngest in a family of three daughters, Marion Anne Perrine Le Pen was born in 1968 in the suburbs of Paris. Her childhood was profoundly shaped by the political presence of her father. Nicknamed the 'Devil of the Republic', Jean-Marie Le Pen has been a polarising figure in French politics since the 1950s. Following an impulse from *Ordre Nouveau* ('New Order'), a neofascist organisation seeking a more politically acceptable outlet, the former paratrooper was turned into the figurehead of the *Front National* (FN) which became the first party to unite far-right groups in France since the Second World War. His relentless attacks on immigration accompanied by a plethora of anti-Semitic and racist comments made him a pariah in the French political scene, but also a prominent target for antifascist movements. This in turn prevented his daughters from growing up 'normally', making them targets by association of verbal but also physical assaults. These violent attacks came to a peak with a bomb attack on the Le Pen family apartment in 1976. Marine Le Pen, eight at the time, claimed to have been deeply shaped by this event which led her to the realisation that her life would be inextricably linked to her father's political engagement.

For the Le Pen family, there was no boundary between private life and political activism, which accounts for the development in her of a 'deeply ingrained conscience of being a target' (Le Pen 2006: 20). Soon after the bomb attack, Jean-Marie Le Pen inherited the fortune of Hubert Lambert, a royalist sympathiser of the FN who died prematurely and chose to bequeath his wealth to the party's founder. This suddenly propelled Marine Le Pen from the middle class to a wealthy lifestyle in Saint-Cloud, one of the most upper-class suburbs of Paris. This also provided her with the economic capital to supplement the

social capital (Bourdieu 1990) that she inherited from her father's political relations, both key facilitators in starting her political career. Especially after the heavily publicised divorce of her parents in 1984, Marine Le Pen, sixteen years old at the time, cut ties with her mother and developed a strong loyalty towards her father (Le Pen 2006: 101–26).

After joining the bar in 1992, Marine Le Pen worked as a lawyer for six years. In 1998, an internal conflict within the FN pushed Marine Le Pen's eldest sister, Marie-Caroline, initially seen as the heir to the political legacy of their father, to side with Bruno Mégret, a rival figure within the party. This event, which her father forcefully described as a 'treason', left her ostracised for decades from both family and party, creating an opportunity for her two younger sisters to step in her place. Given the lack of political ambition of her second sister, Yann, Marine Le Pen intensified her involvement with the FN. Already active in the party, which she had joined when she was eighteen, she gave up her position at the bar to set up a legal branch within the FN. In the following years, Marine Le Pen gave birth to three children and divorced for the first of two times. Her self-proclaimed status as a single mother who raised her three children on her own became a crucial part of her personal storytelling. It was notable for being at odds with the image of social conservatism of the far right in France, where divorcees were frowned upon by the traditions of the Catholic church.

Until 2002, Le Pen's life voluntarily remained distant from the public eye, but this changed with Jean-Marie Le Pen's unexpected accession to the second round of the presidential election. Given the scope of his anticipated defeat on the evening of the second round, very few high-ranking members of the FN were willing to comment on the event on national television, and Marine Le Pen was the only one willing to join the largest TV channel for the evening, becoming the *de facto* voice of her party for her first appearance on television. Describing herself as reluctant to go, Le Pen (2006: 236) candidly claimed that her ignorance of the rules of political debating was her strongest asset, making her appear franker and bolder than her more seasoned colleagues, including future rival Jean-Luc Mélenchon, then member of the socialist party. More than this, that evening, Le Pen demonstrated remarkable ease and command of the rhetoric of her party. Far from the naïve ingénue that she claimed she was at the time, Marine Le Pen appeared in control and consistent during her interventions, lambasting the treatment of her father as an outcast and challenging the other guests for the track records of their political parties in power. All in all, this first televised appearance was a breakthrough for Le Pen which catalysed her emergence as a politician of national relevance.

The years from 2002 to 2007 saw Marine Le Pen steadily climb in the hierarchy of the party. Although her rise was tainted by accusations of nepotism due to her status as daughter of the founder, she unwaveringly established

herself as a central figure in the party. She notably suggested a new strategy seeking to bring the FN into the political mainstream: *dédiabolisation* (Le Pen 2006: 257), or de-demonisation. To do so, she pushed the FN away from the 'far-right' label by taming its divisive rhetoric, condemning overt racism and anti-Semitism but also trying to soften the aggressive image of her father. This issue became especially salient in 2007, when Jean-Marie Le Pen's last bid for the presidential election, for which she took the role of strategic director, led to his defeat at the fourth place. Part of this disappointing result was due to the repeated attempts of Nicolas Sarkozy, the right-wing candidate, to court the FN's electorate by emulating its discourse (Mondon 2013). However, the old leader's infamous reputation also remained a factor of disaffection and his age of seventy-nine did not compare favourably with the youth of his challengers.

It is in the context of her rise inside the party that Le Pen (2006) published her first and currently only autobiography, *À contre flots* ('Against the currents') in 2006. As she narrated her childhood and early political life with detailed anecdotes, the two main features of the book were its antagonistic frame and its defensive tone. Portraying herself as the victim of a multifaceted animosity, she described her life as a succession of struggles that she overcame. Throughout the book, Marine Le Pen mobilised 'a special brand of victimhood – that of the dutiful daughter, born into her father's world, and doing her best to manage the hostility that she encounters as a result. She use[d] the child's naïve point of view, narrating by allusion, in order to strip her opponents of content and context' (Weigel 2017: 1). In the book, Le Pen depoliticised her own life narrative, offering the image of a resilient woman for whom politics was not an opportunistic career choice but rather an obligation that imposed itself onto her and that she only reluctantly embraced. She also repeatedly used the memoir to defend herself against internal accusations of nepotism, describing her father as being 'a thousand times more demanding to his own family than to outsiders' (Le Pen 2006: 90) and his behaviour as the exact 'opposite of nepotism. . . . He is even often the last one to realise the qualities of his children!' (ibid.: 237).

At eighty-one, Jean-Marie Le Pen eventually declared his intention to resign from the presidency of the FN, leading to an election during the 14th Congress of the FN in 2011. This Congress ended up being the apex of a long-standing opposition between Marine Le Pen and Bruno Gollnish, the heir apparent of her father and leader of the more conservative wing of the party. She was elected with two third of the votes, asserting the dominance of her *dédiabolisation* strategy against the more traditionalist wing of the party. This election helped her acquire more control over both her image and that of the party more generally. She developed a more professional and pragmatic outlook to political campaigning, surrounding herself with a new generation of advisers, presenting her party as 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016), and

herself as a young and modern leader. In 2012, Marine Le Pen ran for the first time in the French presidential election on the modernist line developed during the previous years. Despite a record-breaking 18 per cent of the vote in the first round, her bid ended far from the second round, demonstrating that, even with its new strategy and despite the proof that there was considerable potential for electoral improvement, the FN had to make more progress if it aspired to defeat the more established political parties of France.

In 2015, a flurry of anti-Semitic and negationist comments from Jean-Marie Le Pen served as the final trigger for Marine Le Pen to distance herself from her father, evicting him from the very party he had funded. This rupture was highly symbolic as Le Pen framed it as the ultimate public proof that her de-demonisation strategy was a genuine change of convictions and that the FN had truly become a mainstream party. Le Pen also progressively reinforced the visibility of the *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* ('Navy Blue Rally') which she created as a movement to broaden her appeal beyond the limits of her party. Le Pen sought to break with her father's contentious name by using to her advantage the sexist trope of female politicians being referred to by their first name instead of their last name: 'the use of the first name which 'minorises' (in the sense of making minor) women politicians here humanizes (in the sense of making her human, in opposition with her father)' (Matonti 2013: 16). Criticised as another step diverting power away from the party and concentrating it in her hands, this increasing focus on herself was also the demonstration that the FN had become a dynastic party defined first and foremost by the personality of its leader (Stockemer 2017: 51). On 8 February 2016 on national television, Le Pen announced her second bid for the presidency, claiming that she 'will be candidate because [she] thinks politics needs truth, and French politics needs courage. It needs someone who believes in what they stand for'.

Donald J. Trump

Donald John Trump was born in 1946 as the fourth child and second son of Frederick Trump and Mary McLeod. His father, whom he described as his 'most important influence' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 65) was himself the son of a wealthy German immigrant to the United States but developed his fortune as a real estate developer in New York. Donald Trump, who confessed that he 'wasn't exactly well-behaved' (O'Brien 2005: 85) was sent to military boarding school from thirteen to eighteen. After his graduation in 1964, he 'flirted briefly with the idea of attending film school', saying that he 'was attracted to the glamour of the movies' and admired the craft of 'great showmen' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 77). In contrast with the down-to-earth attitude of his father, Donald Trump claimed that he inherited his 'sense of showmanship from [his] mother, . . . who always had a flair for the dramatic and the grand . . . and loves splendor and magnificence' (ibid.: 79–80). Because of the traditional values of Fred Trump and

since his eldest son, Fred Jr., did not show much interest in a career in business, Donald Trump quickly became the natural heir to his father's company.

Although he frequently depicts himself as a self-made man who built a billion-dollar fortune using a 'small one-million-dollar loan' from his father, a euphemistic claim that has been thoroughly debunked,[5] this downplays the symbolic and social capital that, just like Le Pen, he inherited along with the wealth of his family. After an Ivy League education, Trump's ambitions grew beyond the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, where his father was exclusively doing business. In all public descriptions of his life, Donald Trump emphasised this shift to Manhattan in the 1970s as the great point of departure from his father's way of doing business and, more implicitly, as the beginning of his rise as an unparalleled real estate entrepreneur. In 1978, after the renovation of the Grand Hyatt Hotel, he acquired the rights to develop the building most associated with his name, Trump Tower. Until then, Donald Trump remained largely out of the public eye, although his marriage with Ivana Zelníčková in 1977 was one of his first ventures into the 'people' section of New York newspapers. His repeated confrontations with Ed Koch, the mayor of the city who refused tax abatement for Trump's housing complexes because they would only benefit the richest residents, turned him into a local celebrity. This status soon expanded beyond New York as he became a frequent guest on network television, particularly after the inauguration of the Trump Tower in 1983.

Building on that momentum, Trump chose to further depart from his father's subdued way of doing business by investing in personal branding. This idea of turning his last name into a label rapidly became a signature tool for Trump's self-promotion. In addition to that, he hired a ghost-writer, Tony Schwartz, to write his first autobiography, *The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987), which was foundational in establishing Trump's *persona* in the public eye.[6] Schwartz described with remorse how he 'contributed to presenting Trump in a way that brought him wider attention and made him more appealing than he is' or, in other words, how he 'put lipstick on a pig' (Mayer 2016). In the book, Trump was depicted as a skilled businessman, ruthless yet sympathetic, whose life was nothing less than a succession of exceptional deals. More than this, Schwartz presented deal-making as an aesthetic achievement rather than a selfish economic act, as a means rather than an end. This was a crucial shift in portraying Trump as a driven craftsperson who 'gets his kicks' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 1) from the beauty of a successful deal, and not as a greedy capitalist. To reinforce this sympathetic persona, Schwartz mimicked 'Trump's blunt, staccato, no-apologies delivery while making him seem almost boyishly appealing' (Mayer 2016). The book, which became an instant bestseller, remains by far the most successful of his many autobiographies.

In his first major attempt to expand beyond real estate, Donald Trump invested in gambling, ignoring his father's admonition to stay far from this

insecure and volatile business. Given the confidence he had in his 'Midas touch' ability to make any commercial venture flourish, Trump did not take the measure of the economic disaster that his casinos quickly turned out to be. Starting with the overly ambitious and unsustainable Taj Mahal, which filed for bankruptcy only a year after its opening, every Trump casino was declared bankrupt as Trump was forced to renegotiate with his debtors to handle several billions of dollars of debt. In addition to these massive financial issues that heavily troubled the narrative of success he had crafted, the more personal side of his *persona* was tainted when his 'power couple' image with Ivana ended after she publicly accused him of cheating, leading to a heavily mediatised divorce in 1991. Aged forty-five at the time, Trump's *persona* suffered doubly from the blows to both his personal and financial reputation, tarnishing the flawless image he had attempted to establish for decades. Throughout the 1990s, as his romantic life continued to fill the pages of gossip magazines, Trump partly lost control of the personal narrative he had crafted for himself as a successful businessman, becoming instead the embodiment of the excesses of the 1980s and not a credible commercial partner for investors.

In the 1990s, Trump did attempt to offer a counter-narrative to this fall from grace, particularly in his third autobiography, *The Art of the Comeback* (Trump and Bohner 1997) where he portrayed himself as both the victim of a situation beyond his control and a 'survivor' who successfully made a 'comeback'. He also attempted to enhance his image of a seducer constantly surrounded by women, hinting at a sexist perspective on life where value in men was based on their achievements but value in women was based on their attractiveness: 'in Trump's vocabulary, a superlative man is *successful*, a superlative woman is *beautiful*' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 160). Trump also transitioned from real estate to show business, investing in beauty pageants and wrestling, and making cameos in various movies and television shows. However, the real trigger of his pivot to entertainment was his first foray into reality television with *The Apprentice*.

The show was pitched to Trump in 2003 as a unique opportunity to showcase his wealth as well as giving him the central role as 'the main character, the arbiter of talent, the boss – judge, jury and executioner in a weekly winnowing of young go-getters desperate for a chance to run one of the mogul's businesses' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 211). Reluctant at first, Trump then quickly embraced the show for which he was both the star and the executive producer during fourteen seasons. Immediately met with excellent ratings, the show's popularity became a spectacular catalyst for the revival of Trump's career. Where his earlier attempts had failed at giving public salience to his comeback narrative, *The Apprentice* sharpened it and amplified the storytelling of Trump's wealth and business skill, allowing him to restore his credibility to a level that even surpassed that of *The Art of the Deal*. While many staff

members involved with the show now claim that this depiction was exaggerated to make him appear more charismatic on television yet clearly larger than life, these hints of distanciation remain hard to perceive. But even if it is undeniable that *The Apprentice* team did substantially contribute to rejuvenating the image of their star, Trump himself embraced the process willingly, 'honing a blunt speaking style accentuated by short, declarative sentences; delivering taunts – sometimes playful, sometimes searing – at the finalists; and captivating the audience with a theatrical sense of timing' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 214). Even if it built on Trump's media-savviness and thespian skills, I overall concur with Kranish and Fisher (2017: 220) when they argued that the reality show 'was a sustained development of a character, a powerful mainline into the American consciousness, an essential bridge on the journey from builder to politician'.

Although he did consider running a presidential campaign as an independent in 1999, it was only emboldened by the success and momentum of *The Apprentice* that Trump concretely translated his fame into political capital. He then reinvented himself as a political commentator on various issues like foreign policy. Indeed, despite never having held or even run for an elected office before, the reality show had done such an impression at selling the 'image of the host-boss as supremely competent and confident, dispensing his authority and getting immediate results' that, to Kranish and Fisher (2017: 219), 'the analogy to politics was palpable'. This meant that, even as a political novice, Trump could do more than bypass the main channels of political communication: he had privileged access to them and embraced his position as a political outsider as a strength. His influence became especially notable after Barack Obama's election, through his implication as one of the most vehement proponents of the so-called 'birther' movement, a conspiracy theory whose proponents shed doubt on whether Obama was born in the United States. The years leading into the 2016 election saw Donald Trump more solidly establishing himself as a vocal political figure on the national scene. Acknowledging that running outside of the bipartisan system was not a viable option, he eventually anchored himself within the Republican Party in 2012, notably through his programmatic nineteenth book entitled *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (Trump 2015) which sought to affirm his conservative credentials. On 16 June 2015, emulating a famous shot used countless times on *The Apprentice*, Trump went down the golden escalator of Trump Tower to declare his first formal candidacy for president of the United States of America.

Book Structure and Chapter Outline

Now that the stage of this book has been set and its main actors introduced, I will develop the structure of the book by detailing the outline of the following chapters. This book is divided into six chapters, the first three constituting the

theoretical and methodological section of the book, and the final three providing the empirical development of the book.

In **Chapter 1**, I will develop a literature review on the contentious concept of populism. Starting from the etymology and historical uses of the concept, I will investigate the main ways it has been used in the contemporary literature. Distinguishing the ideational, strategic, and discursive approaches, I will then highlight the main tenets of these major definitions of populism. However, acknowledging that the very concept of populism is controversial and contentious, I want to go beyond a strict literature review and consider common connotations and conflations of populism that affect its use in the public discourse. Taking cues from the literature on anti-populism, I will show the need for a critical engagement with populism by contesting its association with demagoguery and anti-pluralism. Furthermore, populism is too often conflated with the far right, framed as nationalist and even potentially authoritarian. In order to clarify the boundaries of populism, I will thus elaborate on the central ideological features of the far right, discussing the way populism differs from the exclusionary nationalism of far-right actors, as well as how they can get intertwined.

Following this literature review, I will discuss in **Chapter 2** my choice to align with the discursive-performative approach to populism (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021) as the theoretical framework of this book, and most specifically embracing the stylistic approach (Moffitt 2016). In this chapter, I will make the case for the use of a distinction between content and form, examining the implications of this dialectical relationship for the study of populism. After a genealogy of the various ways populism has been described as a style and a more specific discussion on the concept of style, I will argue for a theoretically deeper conceptualisation by describing its connections with the Laclauian tradition of work on populism. Although this book follows the footsteps of the trailblazing work of Moffitt (2016), this chapter also details the substantial ways I depart from it. First and foremost, I will make the case that populism is an interdisciplinary concept at the intersection of politics and performance. Following this, I will adapt Moffitt's definition of populism as a style through this interdisciplinary lens, clarifying several key concepts like performance, performativity and repertoire while also bringing conceptual consistency to what he described as the three core features of populism. I will argue that they are most productively reframed as performative clusters: performances of identity, transgression and crisis. Finally, in the light of a discussion on the theoretical relevance of embodied performances for populism, I will justify my choice to analyse populism through the cases of political leaders.

Approaching politics through the lens of style and performance has important implications for the methodology of the research I conducted, which will be developed in **Chapter 3**. I will begin by introducing my choice of

methods for this book which is a combination of computer-assisted critical thematic analysis (CTA) and an original interdisciplinary method designed for this book. Because of the logocentric bias of discourse analysis and the focus on artistic performances from scholars in performance studies, I will introduce my original tool suited to this theoretical framework, the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP). After having highlighted four constitutive elements of social performances – background symbols and foreground scripts, actor, audience and *mise-en-scène* – I will provide for each of them a set of questions which, when combined, constitute this PPAP. Lastly, I will discuss the three types of performances analysed in my book – speeches during rallies, presidential debates and political advertisements – and develop the theatrical specificities of each of these. Based on this discussion, I will explain how I constituted my corpus for this research project and provide a list of the specific performances that will be used as representative illustrations of the analysis I conducted.

After these three first chapters which constituted the first theoretical half of my book, I then move on to the empirical part of my research. **Chapter 4** focuses on performances of identity in the campaigns of Le Pen and Trump. I will make the case that the populist style is built around the simultaneous articulation of two collective identities, the people and the elite, and examine the specific case in which they are articulated by and through a political leader. Examining Trump and Le Pen's performances, I will then successively examine how each of these complementary identities have been performed. Starting with the people, I will consider literal references to the word in their performances, before moving on to cognate words associated with it, most specifically the nation. Following this, I will discuss the elite that Le Pen and Trump are antagonising in their performances, demonstrating that the overarching signifier of 'elite' loosely connects many disparate groups on both domestic and global levels. After the assessment of these two collective constructions of identity, I will analyse the way the two leaders depicted themselves, showing that they incorporated in their performances a hybrid combination of commonality and particularity, or in other words, 'ordinariness and extraordinariness' (Moffitt 2016: 52), to ground their populist representative claims.

In **Chapter 5**, I will first discuss the limits of describing populism as 'flaunting of the low' (Ostiguy 2017) by arguing that such a conceptualisation fails to capture performative practices beyond 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016: 57). Departing from earlier approaches, I will thus introduce the alternative concept of transgression (Aiolfi 2022), defined as the violation of a norm of political relevance, arguing that it better captures the diversity in the norm-breaking behaviours of populist actors. Introducing a new typology that distinguishes transgressive performances depending on what type of norm they break, I will then engage with three specific subtypes: performances disrupting interactional

norms, which are concerned with the proper way to interact with other actors; performances disrupting rhetoric norms, which refer to the expectations about how political actors ought to present themselves; finally, performances disrupting theatrical norms, focusing most specifically on the implicit norm of naturalism in political theatre and on the context-specific traditions and customs of each country. Examining the corpus, I will provide various examples of transgressive strategies used by Trump and Le Pen in order to highlight similarities and contrasts between them.

Chapter 6 describes the third performative cluster of the populist repertoire, performances of crisis. By examining the recurrence of a depiction of a society in crisis in the corpus, I will demonstrate that both Le Pen and Trump's campaigns did not merely react to a particularly critical situation, they performatively articulated the image of a society in crisis. However, rather than speaking about a singular crisis, I show that it would be more accurate to describe them as performing a complex crisis *narrative* that incorporates a multifaceted set of crises affecting various aspects of society. Reflecting two of the collective identities discussed in Chapter 4, I will also identify two sub-narratives of crisis that are respectively based on the excluded others and the elite. On the one hand, I will show that the first sub-narrative is grounded in Trump and Le Pen's far-right ideology – more specifically their exclusionary nationalism – and blames various out-groups (namely immigrants and Muslims) for the crisis. On the other hand, building on the anti-establishment component of the populist style, I will highlight how the second sub-narrative of crisis consists in framing the elite as responsible for and/or complacent about this critical situation.

Finally, the book's **Conclusion** brings together the three empirical chapters by offering a summary of the key distinctions between Le Pen and Trump, highlighting their differences in ideological, personal, contextual and rhetorical terms. Following this, I move on to a more prospective section which uses the insights drawn from this book to engage with the evolution of Trump and Le Pen, particularly during their subsequent presidential campaigns in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Adopting this longer-term perspective provides a critical evaluation of how the two candidates' use of the populist style has evolved since the campaigns examined in this book. After a brief discussion of the research agenda opened by this book, it ends with a few closing remarks on the significance of critically engaging with populism as a concept and a signifier, and what that implies for the future of far-right politics.

Notes

1. A year after that presidential election, in June 2018, Le Pen changed the name of her party into *Rassemblement National* ('National Rally'), abandoning the confrontational connotation of 'front' to replace it with the more unifying expression of 'rally'. This was arguably another step in her *dédiabolisation* ('de-demonising')

strategy, which I will later discuss in the conclusion. Given that this book focuses on events anterior to that change, I will keep using its original name.

2. A collaborative article between *Le Monde* & *AFP* (2017) even lauded French pollsters for the much better accuracy of their results when contrasted with American and British ones.
3. All translations from French to English are my own.
4. Although it has limitations, which will be discussed in the next chapter, I follow in this book the classic distinction in the literature between extreme right and radical right that distinguishes them based on their relationship with democracy (Mudde 2019: 7; Rydgren 2018). While actors within the extreme right are opposed to democracy, radical-right actors accept (some) of the rules of the democratic game. The far right is used as an umbrella term that includes both radical and extreme right.
5. See for instance the *New York Times* investigation led by Barstow, Craig and Buettner (2018) for which the authors won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting.
6. This influence extended way into the 2016 campaign, as Trump declared in the speech where he announced his candidacy that 'We need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal*', to which Schwartz sarcastically replied in a tweet: 'Many thanks Donald Trump for suggesting I run for President, based on the fact that I wrote *The Art of the Deal*.' (Mayer 2016).