

The Church as Arbiter: A Divided Right in Interwar France*

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Abstract

To document the impact of elites choices on political movements, we leverage the condemnation of *L'Action Française* (AF), a monarchist movement, by Pope Pius XI in 1926. As a consequence of the Papal condemnation, French Catholics had to choose between their involvement in AF and accessing Catholic sacraments. Difference-in-differences estimates show that the Papal condemnation reshaped AF's territorial distribution and social basis, weakening its support in religious areas while attracting more secularized followers. Following that shift, AF mutated from being a conservative nationalist movement with strong Catholic connections to an extreme organization entangled with a violent and anti-parliamentarian Right. Our examination of the role of elites in the development of political movements allows us to shed new light on the dynamics that resulted in the collapse of democracy in interwar Europe.

Keywords: Democratic consolidation, Religion, Political extremism, Christian Democracy
JEL Codes: N34, N44, D72, Z12

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1 Introduction

What role do elites play in shaping public opinion? And, more specifically, in what way can they intensify or mitigate political conflict, particularly during periods of growing ideological polarization such as Europe in the 1930s or today's electoral politics in advanced democracies? In interwar Europe, massive social and economic crises seem to explain (to the point of overdetermination) the rise of fascism and communism: over 40 million casualties in World War I; an inflationary spiral in the early 1920s; and, after a brief period of stability, the collapse of stock-markets and trade and soaring unemployment rates during the Great Depression. Yet, upon closer examination, their success was arguably mediated by the specific ideological and policy choices made by European elites. Whereas Nazism devoured Protestant conservative parties in Germany, similar movements hardly dented traditional parties in neighboring countries suffering from a comparable economic shock (Hamilton, 1982). Conversely, while German Catholics remained loyal to the pro-Weimar Zentrum party, the Spanish Catholic Right embraced Franco's coup against the Republic in 1936. Likewise, today's growing political polarization has been attributed to the impact of globalization, immigration and technological change on employment, wages, inequality and, as a result, voters' behavior (Boix, 2019; Milner, 2021). Yet, mass polarization may be also the result of a widening ideological divergence among political elites (Fiorina, 2017; McCarty, 2019).

Estimating the effect of elites on mass political behavior is difficult for two main reasons. First, because elites have a strong incentive to strategically adapt to the preferences of public opinion, it is hard to disentangle the reciprocal effects that may take place between both elites and followers. Second, because supporters may defect to another political movement after a shift in the position of their original movement (or, more generally, the elites that support it), changes in partisan opinions could be mainly driven by compositional effects.

In this paper, we test the weight of elite choices on political movements by looking at the role that the Catholic Church, an organization with a massive following, a tight hierarchical structure and well-developed and effective disciplinary methods, had in the politics of interwar France (and, by extension, interwar Europe). In a context of rampant polarization, and similarly to other European countries, the French Right split between an authoritarian wing (around *L'Action Française* - hereafter AF), which went on to play a decisive role in the riots of 1934 and in Pétain's collaborationist regime, and a democratic side, which ultimately participated in the Resistance and managed to establish a successful Christian democratic

party (MRP) in postwar France. The origins, nature and consequences of the split were mediated by the strategic decisions of centrally-situated elites, that is, a set of social and political players with both the credibility to define the interests and beliefs of their followers and the organizational leverage to spread and enforce them: in the specific case of the French (clerical) Right, the Catholic Church. Once the latter decided to oppose *L'Action Française* explicitly, support for it declined among practicing Catholics and the AF relied on a new organizational strategy and embraced a more openly authoritarian program.

Following the Dreyfus affair and catering to the French monarchist and reactionary opposition to the anti-clerical Third Republic, Charles Maurras published a highly influential journal, *L'Action Française*, at the turn of the twentieth century. Over the next two decades, *L'Action Française* evolved into a growing nationalist and anti-democratic political movement, with a strong following among conservative Catholics. Throughout its development, *L'Action Française* was a model for other authoritarian (including fascist) movements, with which it established important ideological links.¹ Concerned about AF's nationalistic values and its overall influence on Catholics, the Church's Congregation of the Index decided to forbid reading Charles Maurras' books as well as the newspaper *L'Action Française* in 1914. However, due to the outbreak of World War I and the election of a new Pope, the publication of the decision was delayed until January 1927. Two months later, the Vatican doubled down on its condemnation by denying access to all sacraments to any person that defied the ban, hence effectively cutting off any (informal) ecclesiastical support AF may have enjoyed in the past.

Employing a difference-in-differences design, we exploit the Papal decision to assess how *L'Action Française* reacted to the Church's condemnation. Our empirical results suggest that the opposition of the Church had a sharp effect on the organizational structure, spatial distribution, social support, and strategic actions of *L'Action Française*. The Papal condemnation shocked the structure of the movement, depressing the number of territorial branches and the number of public meetings of *L'Action Française*. The condemnation also influenced the geographical location of the branches of the League of *L'Action Française*. After the condemnation, *L'Action Française* maintained relatively fewer branches in those areas more exposed to the message of the Pope, that is, in places with a higher proportion of Catholics attending mass. At the same time, AF mobilized new members and created branches in more secularized regions. Moreover, AF experienced higher growth in those (low-religiosity) dioceses where the Papal condemnation was enforced more strictly.

¹In 1923, Giacomo Lumbroso would write that 'the Italian fascism likely learned a lot from the *Action Française*, which ideologically was its elder (cited in Weber 1964, p.158).

We interpret this outcome as evidence of a social backlash against what some sectors took as an unwelcome religious interference in the political arena. In line with these results, we do find that, freed from the need to accommodate the views of moderate Catholics, *L'Action Française* adapted its objectives and actions to the new constraints set by the Papal condemnation, to the point of becoming gradually more aligned with the French anti-parliamentarian far right, which we measure by looking at the geographical distribution of political violence, and the vote share of the radical right in the strongly polarized parliamentary election of 1936.

Our paper contributes to three strands of research: the role of elites in politics; the relationship between religion and political attitudes and behavior; and the evolution of the political and partisan landscape of interwar Europe. A growing literature has shown that elites shape public preferences, particularly when the recipient of their messages perceive them to be knowledgeable and to share the latter's interests (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Druckman and Lupia, 2000), are key elements in the spread of information (Becker et al., 2020), and mobilize individuals into social and political action (Dippel and Heblich, 2021; Cagé et al., 2023). Elites have also played a central role both in the selection of politicians, reducing coordination problems through the endorsement of particular candidates (Cox, 1997; Pulejo, 2022), and in the policy-making process by supporting specific policies and politicians (Kalyvas, 1996; Garthwaite and Moore, 2013). This paper moves this literature forward in two directions. First, it examines the moderating role of elites in a context of growing social and economic polarization. Second, it considers how extremist movements responded to a switch among elites – a question that has received less attention in the literature.

Second, our research relates to previous work on the political economy of religion, the extent to which political and religious elites may share common interests, and how religious leaders may impact political behavior and strategies or not. Churches have been found to influence political attitudes and behavior through religious doctrine, their public teaching, and the dynamics associated with communal prayer in observational studies (Andersen and Jensen, 2019; McClendon and Riedl, 2019; Koukal, 2020; Hoffman, 2021; Wang, 2021) and experimental work (McClendon and Riedl, 2015; Blair et al., 2021; Condra et al., 2019). Ecclesiastical institutions have also shaped the nature and extent of political mobilization: endorsing the formation of Christian democratic parties (Kalyvas, 1996), containing the growth of the Nazi party in Catholic areas (Spenkuch and Tillmann, 2018), and supporting indigenous movements and left-wing

candidates in Latin America (Trejo, 2009; Tuñón, 2024).² In this paper, we advance this literature by looking at a key dilemma faced by religious leaders in the political arena (Kalyvas, 1996) and testing it through a novel identification strategy. On the one hand, religious authorities strive to shape public policy to shape society (or, at least, to be tolerated by the state in the realms of religious practice, education, and so on). On the other hand, some political agents may attempt to use religious ideas and institutions to legitimize their actions (Rubin, 2017), in the process jeopardizing the autonomy of churches. Accordingly, the latter's leaders will tailor their relation to different political actors to achieve the most preferred ideal policy while minimizing the possibility of a loss of followers (and any ideological or organizational subordination to a temporal power).

Finally, by examining the evolution of the French (and, by extension, the European) Right over the interwar period, we provide a fuller understanding of the factors that shaped the multiple crises affecting Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Strict structural factors, such as the shadow of the war and the demobilization of veterans, the rise of communism in Russia, and dramatic economic downturns certainly polarized both Left and Right and contributed to the collapse of democracy in many countries in the 1930s (Linz, 1978; Luebbert, 1991). However, the political responses to those critical events remained rather heterogeneous within each ideological camp. In the particular case of France, the intervention of the Church arguably hindered the expansion of what was a well-organized reactionary movement, opening a window of opportunity for Christian democratic values and politicians.

2 Theory

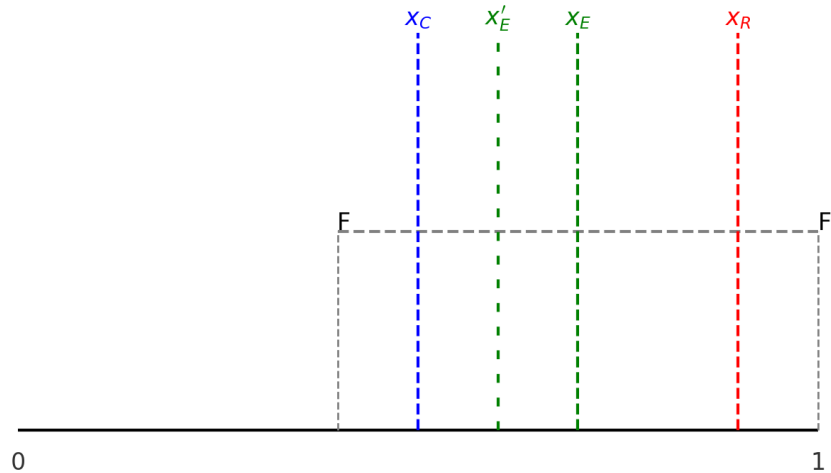
Political preferences, that is, the comparative evaluation an individual makes over a set of political and policy outcomes, are, to a large extent, determined by the information and opinions provided and the actions (including promises and threats) taken by other agents in that individual's environment (Druckman and Lupia, 2000). Among these agents, elites play a particular effective role in shaping mass preferences and, relatedly, mass behavior (Berelson, 1954). Elites have more information, which gives them the ability to shape the attitudes of less informed persons (Zaller, 1992; Kinder, 1998), and their followers see them as more knowledgeable—a key factor shown to influence behavior (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Besides being better informed, elites have key resources that can be deployed to mobilize their followers. Elites stand at the central nodes of political networks: this allows them to solve coordination problems pervasive in politics,

²For historical work on the impact of religion, see Schulz et al. (2019) and Grzymała-Busse (2023).

such as adjudicating between candidates within parties (Cox, 1997; Pulejo, 2022). They hold also economic and social resources, such as money and access to jobs to incentivize particular behaviors among their followers. If elites control an organization, such as unions or churches, they can deploy even stronger rewards and sanctions ranging from public commendations to the expulsion from the organization run by the elite.

To model the impact of elites on political actors (particularly in a context of rising political polarization), consider the following set-up, that builds on the formal framework proposed by Spenkuch and Tillmann (2018). In a polity, there are three types of individuals: political elites P , non-political (here religious) elites E , and citizens. A fraction of citizens are followers f of the non-political elite (such as Catholic laypeople in the church). The preferences of all citizens are distributed along a policy space x – in the way represented in Figure 1. Even though non-political elites care about policy outcomes (to be delivered by politicians), they also consider maximizing the number of (and influence over) followers. Followers, who are distributed over the segment $F-F'$ of the whole space, value policy positions as well as the approval of non-political elites. The approval of the latter comes here through the non-application of a penalty. In our case, where the elite is church leadership, the penalty may consist of public admonishments, excommunication, and so on.

Figure 1: Distribution of policy preferences of politicians, elites and voters.



One-dimensional space where x_C denotes the position of a centrist political elite, x_R marks the policy position of a right-wing political elite, and x_E and x'_E show the policy ideals of an (ecclesiastical) elite. The latter's followers are distributed uniformly in the segment $F-F'$.

At an initial moment, there are two political elites (leading separate political movements): a center type C with policy position x_C , and a right-wing politician R with position x_R . Their ideal policy positions are

fixed. An ecclesiastical leader holds a policy ideal x_E in the midpoint between both candidates' platforms. The leader is accordingly indifferent between them, provided he can control his followers, or, in other words, that none of the two political elites can shape the preferences of religious followers to the point the latter may not heed ecclesiastical norms. In turn, these religious followers choose to back those political elites (as any other citizen does) to minimize any loss of utility resulting from the potential deviation in policy x from their ideal point. Formally, each follower f evaluates the utility from a politician j as $U(P_j) = -(x_j - x_f)^2 - \epsilon$. The parameter ϵ (for excommunication) captures the penalty that the church leader may impose on followers that support a politician E dislikes.

At some point, there is a change in the ecclesiastical position (caused, for example, by a new leadership) to x'_E . To move his followers away from R , E threatens individuals supporting politician R with a penalty $\epsilon > 0$. Formally, a follower f of E supports C whenever $-(x_C - x_f)^2 > -(x_R - x_f)^2 - \epsilon$. This has several implications from a political point of view:

1. A fraction of followers to the right of the midpoint between candidates $(x_R - x_c) + \epsilon$ will stop supporting R and switch to C .
2. The fraction of switchers will be a function of: (a) their information about the new position and the excommunication threat of the new church leader, e.g. consumers of Catholic newspapers (in our case) will be more likely to abandon R ; (b) their evaluation of the penalty, e.g. practicing Catholics will be more likely to follow the instructions of the Church; and, (c) the credibility of the sanction; e.g. Catholics in dioceses governed by bishops more aligned with the Vatican (the ecclesiastical leader in our case) will be more likely to switch.
3. The new position of the (ecclesiastical) elite may also affect the position of R . If R initially held a moderate position (relative to her true preferences) to avoid alienating E and to attract more followers of E , R may decide to move to the right after the non-political elite moves to the left (and pressures its followers to do the same).

Even though we have discussed the consequences of a switch in the preferences of E leading to the condemnation of R and the use of penalties against R 's supporters, similar results should follow if, first, the elite was concerned about a loss of influence over its followers (with the latter's preferences moving closer to R as a result, for example, of the messages and media under the control of this candidate), or,

second, if R moved away from E , perhaps responding to the (rightward) polarization of voters' preferences.

To sum up, the introduction of a non-political elite in the political arena transforms the dynamics of the latter, particularly if that elite has the organizational resources to discipline its followers. Candidates' chances are now a function of both the policy preferences of citizens and the policy objectives of that elite. Under certain conditions, that elite can exercise a restraining or moderating effect on the political system. If some citizens move to more extreme positions in the policy space, centrist (non-political) elites can deploy their resources to hold them to moderate, mainstream parties. To go back to the historical case of interwar Europe, this may explain in part why the fortunes of party systems diverged across countries that experienced similar structural shocks, such as the Great Depression and the rise of fringe candidates.

3 Historical Background

3.1 Origins of *L'Action Française* (1899-1914)

After two decades of contentious politics around France's constitutional regime, the Third Republic became fully consolidated at the end of the nineteenth century. A once powerful monarchical Right was in full disarray. A new generation of intensely anticlerical politicians, organized around the Radical party, asserted themselves as the central force in the National Assembly. And the Catholic Church explicitly accepted republican institutions. Adopting a conciliatory strategy to temper the anticlerical assaults of Radicals and Radical Socialists, Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical in 1892 asking French Catholics to accept the Republic and to participate in its political life.³

In contrast to other European countries, however, French Catholics failed to organize a mass Christian democratic party for two main reasons: a hesitant ecclesiastical hierarchy (Kalyvas, 1996) and the political polarization that followed from the Dreyfus affair, which partly redrew the old Right/Left divide around the questions of French national identity and antisemitism. In 1899, some nationalists and a fraction of Catholic elites converged around a common anti-dreyfusard ideology, starting the newspaper *L'Action Française* under the intellectual direction of Charles Maurras. A few years later, coinciding with the passage of a law fully separating Church and state and the governmental closing of numerous Catholic schools, they founded the League of *L'Action Française*.⁴ *L'Action Française*, which reaffirmed its attachment

³This section summarizes the historical evolution of *L'Action Française* and its Papal condemnation. For a detailed historical analysis, see (Weber, 1964; Leymarie et al., 2008; Prévotat, 2001, 2004).

⁴In the rest of the paper, we use League of *L'Action Française* and *L'Action Française* interchangeably for simplicity.

to Catholic values (Prévotat, 2001, pp.37-38), massively invested to convince religious authorities to join the movement. Bishops received the newspaper of *L'Action Française* for free (Prévotat, 2001, p.52) and numerous priests attended conferences organized by *L'Action Française*, using its rhetoric in their sermons. By the time World War I broke out, AF had become a key actor in Catholic politics.

From its very inception, *L'Action Française* opposed the Republic and espoused a strong nationalist and anti-semitic political discourse. Before joining the League of *L'Action Française*, members had to sign a declaration in which they pledged to fight democratic ideals and work for the restoration of the monarchy. In its 1921 Yearbook, *L'Action Française* stated “the destruction of the democratic hordes and the establishment of a regime guaranteeing order, authorities and liberties: the French monarchy” as its main objective (AF 1921: p.181). The language and organization of AF influenced other movements within and outside France. As noted by Jenkins and Millington (2015, p.2), it “provided the model of the combative extra-parliamentary ‘league’ formation”. Some of its contemporaries claimed that the organization served as a model for other fascists abroad and was ideologically linked to them.⁵

A double allegiance to the monarchical idea and the Church soon became problematic, both within the AF and among ecclesiastical authorities. On the one hand, *L'Action Française* denounced the Republic’s anticlerical policies to rally Catholics to its organization (see Prévotat 2001, pp.67-68) while also criticizing Leo XIII’s encyclical in favour of the Republic. On the other hand, the Catholic Church became increasingly concerned about both AF’s programmatic positions and its influence over an important fraction of Catholic believers. Moderate members of the episcopate denounced AF’s ideas by the late 1900s (Prévotat, 2001, p. 110), circulating books and leaflets that criticized Charles Maurras and other publicists of *L'Action Française*. Stressing the fact that AF’s ideology was incompatible with Catholicism, they claimed that *L'Action Française* had an instrumental conception of religion. A year after heated debates over the writings of Charles Maurras burst into the open, the Congregation of the Index, the Vatican’s office in charge of religious censorship, voted to condemn five books of Maurras and the newspaper of *L'Action Française* in 1914 (Prévotat, 2001, p. 192).⁶ Pius X, who was sympathetic to anti-modernist attitudes

⁵See Weber 1964, p.158. The definition of AF as a fascist organization, which was directly applied by AF’s enemies, is the subject of a heated debate in the French historiography. The purpose of this paper is not to take position on this topic, hence it refers to AF as a nationalist, anti-democratic, extremist or radical right organization.

⁶Even though the official reasons of this decision were ideological and related to Charles Maurras’ positivist tendencies, the decision could also have been strategic as the Church was losing its influence over part of its members (Prévotat, 2001, p. 192).

within the Church, signed the decree in early 1914 but withheld its publication. Upon his death in August of that year, the new Pope, Benedict XV, decided to postpone its publication to avoid political controversies during World War I that could have been interpreted as taking sides among the combatants.

3.2 The Condemnation of 1926-1927

After supporting the French government, presided by Clémenceau, a Radical politician, during World War I, *L'Action Française* became quickly critical of France's appeasement plans toward Germany following the armistice. Riding on a strong nationalist platform, AF's newspaper circulation peaked in 1919, at almost 160,000 daily copies, and about twenty AF candidates were elected to the National Assembly that year as part of the right-wing political bloc *Union nationale*. If anything, AF's grip on fundamentalist Catholics grew tighter. In 1925, a poll by the *Cahiers de la jeunesse catholique belge* revealed Charles Maurras to be seen as an ideological guide by a majority of young Catholics.

Troubled by AF's traditionalist ideas and its social basis of support (heavily defined by the membership and ethos of the old nobility, landed elites and other upper-middle-class groups), the pro-democratic members of the Catholic clergy reignited their campaign against AF in the mid 1920s. As several religious orders like the Jesuits and Catholic associations like *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* complained, AF's intellectual sway over French catholicism made it impossible to re-evangelize the working-class and secularized sectors of French society (Weber, 1964, pp.225-228).

By the summer of 1926, the Pope decided to adopt a less conciliatory attitude towards *L'Action Française*. Likely prodded by the Vatican, the Archbishop of Bordeaux, Paulin Andrieu, wrote a public letter on August 25th, 1926 denouncing the "teachings" of *L'Action Française* and its influence on French youth (Prévotat, 2001, p.277). Charles Maurras published a soft rebuttal in *L'Action Française* on September 2nd. Three days later, Pope Pius XI backed up the Archbishop of Bordeaux in a public letter. The aggrieved reaction of AF's leadership resulted in the escalation of conflict with the Church. Pius XI eventually responded by approving the 1914 decision to forbid Maurras' books and the newspaper of *L'Action Française* in December 1926 and then making it public in January 1927. This decision set off a war between *L'Action Française* and the Pope, with the former accusing the latter of supporting Germany and the Vatican charging *L'Action Française* with paganism. On March 7th, 1927 the Church effectively excommunicated any member of AF, denying any religious sacraments such as marriage or a

Christian burial to them. In addition to employing spiritual penalties against AF, the Church intervened institutionally to reinforce its position. After *La Croix*, France's main Catholic newspaper, supported the Vatican ban rather tepidly, Fr. Leon Merklen was appointed its new editor in December of 1927. From that point forward, *La Croix* condemned Maurras without any hesitation, aligning itself with Christian democrats, and promoting key progressive organizations such as the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*.

4 The Effects of the Papal Condemnation

The Papal condemnation, implemented by the Church with all its institutional might, had a strong effect on *L'Action Française*. In overall terms, its following base shrank quickly. The number of subscriptions to the newspaper *L'Action Française* plummeted in few months – to less than 60,000 daily copies (Weber, 1964). After peaking in 1927, the number of yearly public meetings around France declined consistently over time (cf. Figure 6, right panel).⁷

The fall in support was particularly pronounced among practicing Catholics. In a matter of months, well-known Catholic intellectuals and publicists, such as Jacques Maritain or George Bernanos, turned away from any sympathies they had signaled toward AF before (Weber, 1964). A few regional studies show that AF lost considerable traction within Catholic organizations. In France's southwestern region, where AF had organized the security of both the diocesan conference and the Catholic congress of Bordeaux in 1925, its influence waned after the condemnation. Membership fell from 8,000 in 1926 to 3,000 in 1932 in the diocese of Bordeaux alone (Agostino, 2008, p.284-287). Reports from the French prefecture tell a similar story for France's Nord region (Vavasseur-Desperriers, 2008, p.305). Bensoussan (2008) refers to the impact of the condemnation in Brittany, one of the fortresses of Catholicism, as “un véritable ébranlement” – “a real shock” (p. 319).

By contrast, AF arguably managed to retained traditional but purely ‘sociological’ Catholics. Conflicted between following the Church's doctrine and Maurras' ideas, they put nation and order above religious principles. In addition, AF attracted anticlerical nationalists reacting to what they defined as an excessive heavy-handedness on the part of the Church. In response to the Church's interdiction to provide religious burials to AF Catholics, the League held public mobilizations during secular funerals that gained considerable

⁷The evolution of AF membership is disputed territory. According to Prévotat (2004), just in the fall and winter of 1926-27, the AF lost about 1,250 members . Yet, according to the same author, the membership to the League of *L'Action Française* rose by 22% in 1927 (Prévotat, 2001, p.503).The author interprets this decrease followed by a bounce-back in the number of members as evidence of a rally-around-the-flag effect once the condemnation materialized. After the Catholic core had left the organization, the movement reorganized, attracting new members.

national attention (Agostino, 2008, p.287). In May 1934, for example, when a local priest refused to bury a local politician identified as a sympathizer of *L'Action Française* in the Somme *département*, a rally organized by supporters of the League from the whole department resulted in a riot (Weber, 1964, p. 270). The post-1926 AF joiners were, according to Jean Madiran, the private secretary of Charles Maurras in the 1940s, “étrangère au catholicisme” (quoted by Prévotat (2004), p.69).

This historical setting is very useful to capture the effect of the condemnation in two ways. First, we leverage spatial variation in both religiosity and the structure of the episcopate to explain changes in the organizational structure of the AF following the condemnation. Because practicing Catholics were unevenly distributed across France and Catholic bishops differed in the zeal with which they enforced the Vatican condemnation, the Papal decree shaped the structure of AF in two ways. In the first place, it shifted its geographical distribution, reducing its presence in French regions with a high fraction of practicing Catholics while growing in highly secularized areas. In the second place, it pushed the League to reorganize internally. Probably due to the loss of membership in some areas and to the repression exercised by most Catholic bishops, AF invested in the creation of small, non-permanent sections as opposed to the permanent branches with an office or locale that dominated the AF before 1926. As pointed by Vavasseur-Desperriers (2008, p.305) in his study on the AF in the Nord region, the League, somehow unable to operate publicly, invested in underground propaganda instead.

Second, we use a break in time to test whether the geography of AF branches created after the condemnation coincided with more political extremism than the geography of branches created before. This should also shed more light on the programmatic shift of *L'Action Française* after 1926. Since its creation at the turn of the century, *L'Action Française* had maintained an ambiguous and often contradictory ideological discourse. On the one hand, it rallied around a set of traditional values – *Patrie*, family, order, a strong executive, and a “well-understood” regionalism – that resonated with the French Right and its sociological religious roots (Weber, 1964; Kalyvas, 1996; Boix et al., 2021). In addition, Charles Maurras defended the Church as one of the few institutions (if not the only one) that had resisted modern capitalism and its chrematistic and utilitarian values. On the other hand, *L'Action Française*'s ideological leader, who declared himself agnostic, maintained an (at a minimum) ambivalent position toward the institutional and intellectual authority of the Catholic church. In fact, AF espoused values explicitly condemned by the latter. It favored

a fully instrumental understanding of political action to the point of justifying violence. It preached a radical anti-semitism. It maintained xenophobic attitudes towards those whom Maurras referred to as the “métèques”. It did not hide its sympathies for Italian fascism. And, above all, it abode by the theory of “nationalisme intégral” that proclaimed the superiority of the nation over any previous moral order or natural law system.

Once the Vatican condemned the ideas of *L’Action Française*, the religious ties that bound the League started to unravel.⁸ AF became ideologically “unhinged”, radicalizing in the process. Beginning in 1927, AF turned into a clearly anti-establishment movement. Whereas the newspaper *L’Action Française* had interpreted the general elections of 1919 and 1924 as a fight between Right and Left and endorsed conservative candidates “to strip socialism away from the suburbs” (in 1919) and to achieve “the conquest of Paris” (in 1924), by the 1928 general elections, it characterized the elections as a “tragic joke” overall.⁹ AF’s anti-parliamentarism evolved into the justification of violence if necessary to save the country. *L’Action Française* became one of the organizers of the riots of February 6th, 1934, during which tens of thousands of protesters attempted to assault the Chamber of Deputies. In April 1935, Maurras wrote that the leader of the socialist party, Léon Blum, who epitomized for *L’Action Française* the Left that would ruin the country, deserved to be shot in the back.¹⁰ In February 1936, Léon Blum was the victim of a violent lynching by members of the radical right, including *L’Action Française*’s sympathizers. The League of *L’Action Française*, as other extreme-Right leagues, was dissolved by a ministerial order in February 1936.¹¹

5 Data

5.1 *L’Action Française*

We have digitized the yearbooks (*Almanach*) of the movement of *L’Action Française* to determine the location of each branch of the League of *L’Action Française* at the commune-level from Gallica/Bibliothèque Nationale. The League was organized in local branches (*sections*). In principle, each branch had a minimum of 40 members (Prévotat, 2004). The branches spread *L’Action Française*’s ideas and organized public meetings (e.g. conferences, propaganda, debates). Their members had to sign a declaration whereby they

⁸In his study on Brittany, Bensoussan (2008, p.321) notes that “the condemnation went as far as to end the continuous union of the Rights behind the clerical banner”.

⁹These front pages are publicly accessible on Gallica website following these links (All Consulted on October 31, 2021). 1919: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7603240> / 1924: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k761946k> / 1928: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k763388d>

¹⁰The newspaper is accessible here : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7659336>.

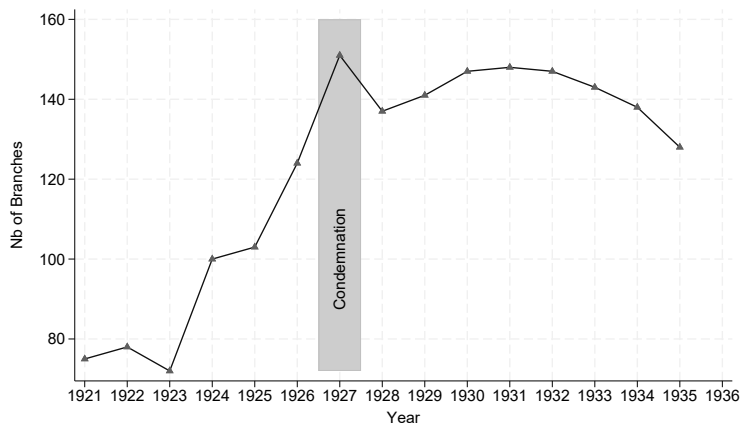
¹¹The organization survived, however, and *L’Action Française* still exists today. Website: <https://www.actionfrancaise.net/>

committed “to fight any republican regime”. The Yearbook of year t reports the branch present in a city in October of year $t-1$. Hence, variations in the number of branches from year to year can be interpreted as variation between October of a calendar year $t-1$ and October of the following calendar year.

AF’s yearbooks reported three types of branches: “sections ayant une permanence effective”, that is, sections with “premises dedicated for the meetings, the library and the propaganda” (p.495, Almanach 1928); sections with president; sections without any reference to president (and reporting only an address). We focus on the first type mainly because that type of branches was the only one consistently reported in the Almanach throughout the whole period of analysis.¹²

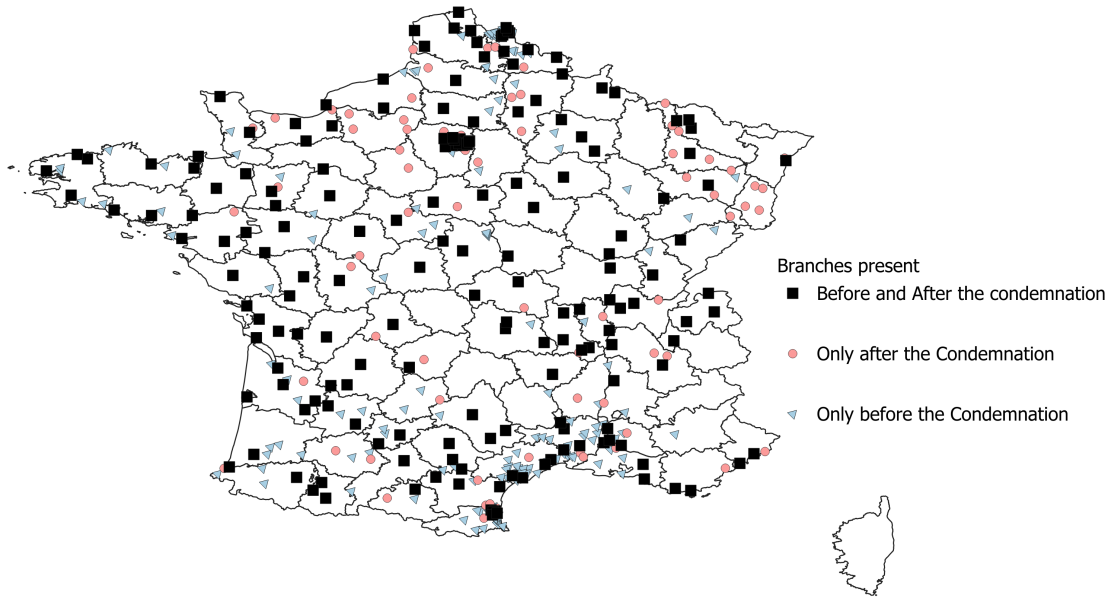
Figure 2 displays the evolution of the number of branches (with premises) of *L’Action Française* from 1921 to 1935. Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of *L’Action Française*, before and after the Papal condemnation. The black squares represent the branches that appear in yearbooks before and after the condemnation. The red dots represent branches that appear in yearbooks after the condemnation but not before the condemnation and the blue triangles represent branches that appear in the yearbooks before the condemnation but not after. Two facts stand out. First, while the development of *L’Action Française* followed a linear, stable growth path before the condemnation, that rather constant growth stopped shortly afterward. Second, the overall spatial distribution of the number of branches was rather stable. However, whereas some regions, such as the Nord, Finistère, the Landes and Languedoc-Provence, experienced a decrease in the number of branches, other regions, such as the northeast or Alsace-Lorraine, saw an increase in sections.

Figure 2: Branches of the League d’L’Action Française: Time variation



¹²We explore the evolution and determinants of the other types of branches in subsection 6.3.

Figure 3: Branches of the League d’L’Action Française: Geography



5.2 Religion

To measure the potential impact of the Papal condemnation, we distinguish two components of religion: (1) Religiosity – how likely the population was to receive and follow the message of the Pope and (2) Episcopal Hierarchy – the probability that bishops enforced the condemnation of *L’Action Française*. The purpose of this exercise is to take the different dimensions of religion into account to better understand which organizational characteristic(s) of Catholicism impacted *L’Action Française* and through which dimension(s) of Catholicism did the Papal condemnation percolate.

Religiosity – We measure religiosity as the share of citizens attending Easter mass in 1919. This measure is taken from Boix et al. (2021). It takes advantage of religious surveys conducted by diocesan authorities and gathered in the collection *Matériaux pour une l’histoire religieuse du peuple français XIXème, XXème siècle* (Boulard, 1982). The variable provides cross-canton variation in religiosity. In 1919, it covers all departments except the Charente and the Drôme.

Episcopal Hierarchy in 1926: From Prévotat (2001, p.713), we use information on bishops appointments and, more specifically, on the Pope who appointed each bishop.¹³ We focus on two ideologically-close popes, Leo XIII and Pius XI, who opposed either AF or its ideas. Through his encyclical "Inter Sollicitudines", published on February 16, 1892, Leo XIII prompted French Catholics to accept and participate in the

¹³The bishops were appointed by the Pope after consulting various authorities.

Republic.¹⁴ In turn, Pius XI condemned *L'Action Française* in 1926. Because bishops were appointed when their predecessors died, the geographical availability of a bishop position in a specific diocese can be taken as random. Hence, under the assumption that bishops were ideologically aligned with the pope who appointed them, we can exploit a quasi-exogenous variation in the ideology of bishops across the French territory and their willingness to enforce the condemnation (more details appear in Section 6.2). In the paper, the variable *Anti-AF Bishops* equals one if a bishopric was ruled by a bishop appointed either by Leo XIII or Pius XI and zero otherwise. In Appendix C, we present the methodology to classify popes according to their position with respect to *L'Action Française* and show this full classification.

5.3 Other Determinants and Control Variables

In addition to our variables of interest, we consider other factors influencing the location of the branches of *L'Action Française*. The main variable of interest we use is population at the municipality-level (from the French National Statistical Institute - INSEE)¹⁵. In our most conservative estimates, we also control for the vote share of the Left in 1919 from Lachapelle (1928) (see descriptions in Appendix D). Controlling for these variables ensures that our estimates do not capture a correlate of religiosity that would also explain changes in the re-organization of *L'Action Française*. In addition, we control for the number of Catholic and republican associations created in each city in each year.¹⁶ The creation of these different types of association proxies the activity of different movements that were linked to *L'Action Française* (Church-sponsored organizations before 1926) or stood in opposition to it (republican associations). After adding these controls, our estimators do not capture the general evolution of organizations linked to ideals either compatible or incompatible with the programmatic change of the AF.

6 A Shifting Coalition: AF's New Geography and Organization

6.1 New Coalition: The Exit of Practicing Catholics

To gauge how the Papal condemnation impacted *L'Action Française* in the most religious areas, we estimate the differences around the break in the trend documented by Figure 2 in a difference-in-differences setting. The treated period is 1927-1935 whereas the pre-treatment period is 1921-1926.

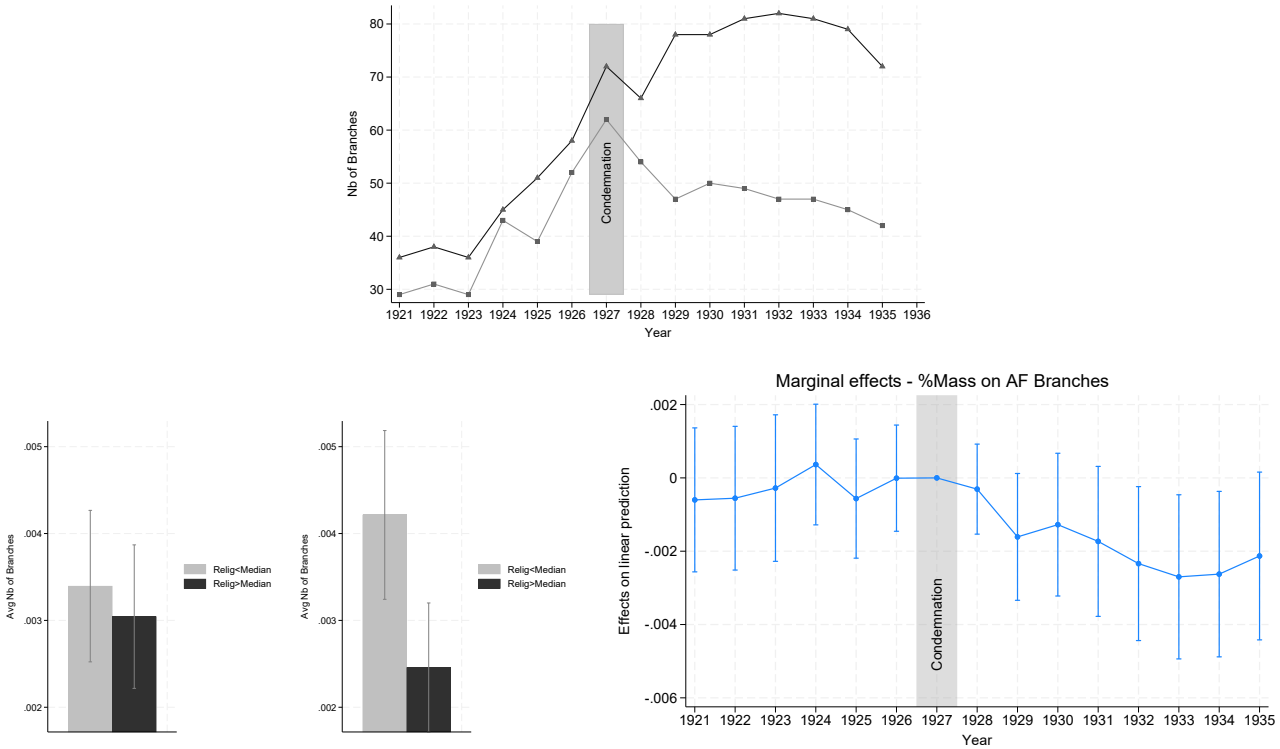
¹⁴One day after its publication, he declared to the newspaper "Le Petit Journal" that the Republic "was a legitimate form of government".

¹⁵<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3698339>

¹⁶We identify these different types of associations by determining whether their title or description contain the word Catholic (Catholique) or the word Republican (Republicain).

Figure 4 presents a first snapshot of our results. The upper-left panel displays the number of branches in areas of high and low religiosity every year. The vertical bar marks the time of the Papal condemnation. Until 1926, *L'Action Française* grew at a similar pace regardless of the level of religiosity of a municipality – with just a small departing advantage in low-religiosity localities. After the condemnation, the growth of *L'Action Française* in low-religiosity areas decreased but remained positive. In high-religiosity areas, by contrast, the number of branches experienced an important drop. The upper-right panel shows the average number of branches by municipality-year. Again, whereas we do not observe any difference between the two areas before the condemnation, a clear gap arose after it. The bottom panel presents coefficient plots. These plots also show that religiosity did not explain the geography of the branches of *L'Action Française* before the condemnation but did after the condemnation.

Figure 4: Religion and the Evolution of AF Location



Note: Religiosity is defined as the proportion of citizens attending the Easter mass in 1919. Upper-left panel: Total number of branches (= "sections") of *L'Action Française* created in high-religiosity municipalities (in black) and in low-religiosity (in grey). Upper-right panel: Average number of branches created by municipality-year before (1921-1926) and after the treatment (1927-1935). Bottom panel: Correlation coefficients between the measure of religiosity and the number of branches of *L'Action Française* in municipalities. The Figure plots the vector Γ of coefficients of the regression $AF_{i,t} = \alpha + \Gamma_1 Religion_i \times \mathbb{1}(Year = t) + \beta_3 Post1926_t \times Pop1926_i + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}$

We turn to estimating the following equation considering religiosity as a continuous treatment variable

materializing after the condemnation:

$$AF_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 Post1926_t \times Religion_i + \beta_2 Post1926_t \times Control_i + \eta_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

Our dependent variable is a dummy variable equal to 1 if there is an AF branch in municipality i in year t . $Post_{1926}$ is an indicator variable equal to one from 1927 onwards. η_i are communes fixed effects and γ_t are year fixed effects. The year fixed effects encompass the space-invariant time-trend in the number of branches of *L'Action Française*. We add four types of controls and their interaction with the $Post_{1926}$ dummy variable. First, population levels in 1926 the municipality level interacted with the $Post_{1926_t}$ variable. This second interaction controls for the possibility that AF was not systematically targeting bigger municipalities after the Papal condemnation. Second, we control for a dummy variable equal to one if the municipality belongs to a department if readership of *La Croix* was high in this department. This ensures that our effect does not emerge only because some areas had greater access to the changing message of this newspaper around the condemnation. Third, we control for the voting share of the left in 1919 to control for the initial size of the opposing coalition to *L'Action Française* after World War I. Finally, we also control for the number of either Catholic or republican associations. Each of these variables is interacted with the $Post_{1926}$ dummy variable to ensure that they do not explain the reorganization of *L'Action Française* towards less religious areas after the condemnation. Errors are clustered at the cantonal-level. The lower panel of Figure 4 shows parallel trends prior to treatment. After the condemnation, the coefficients attached to our measure of religiosity decrease and become statistically different from zero from 1932 onwards. Given the presence of parallel trends, the difference-in-differences estimators in Table 1 can be interpreted as the causal impact of the condemnation.

Table 1 presents the result of the estimation of Equation (1) both at the municipal level (Panel A) and at the cantonal level (Panel B). The results offer a consistent picture as the coefficients attached to the $Post_{1926} \times \%Mass$ interaction are always significant at least at the ten-percent level – and, reassuringly, at the one-percent level with full controls and fixed effects. The coefficients at the municipal-level (Panel A) imply that a one standard deviation difference in mass attendance in 1919 led to a decrease in the probability of having a branch by 10 to 28%. At the county-level, a canton in the bottom quartile had on average 0.4% to 0.5% more branches than a canton in the third quartile of the religiosity distribution. To make sense of this number, the extensive margin implies that the probability of having an AF branch

was around 0.6 percentage points lower in the third quartile compared to the bottom quartile. Hence, the difference in religiosity between the bottom and the third quartiles reduced the probability of having a branch in our sample (which is 4.4 percentage points) by approximately 10 to 15%. In Columns 1.5 to 1.9, we progressively add the control variables described above. If anything, the coefficient becomes larger as we add these control variables as capture more of the post-condemnation variation in branches. Hence our estimators are not explained by the targeting of larger/smaller cities by *L'Action Française*, the reorganization towards leftist areas or towards/away Catholic/republican associations. In the spirit of Callaway et al. (2024), Appendix A.1 shows that local increases in religiosity within different quantiles of treatment also explain a decrease in the presence of *L'Action Française*.

To sum up, the territorial and social support of *L'Action Française* changed following the papal ban, mediated by the strength of the Catholic church. Whereas the number of branches of *L'Action Française* remained stable in non-religious areas following the condemnation, it decreased in the most religious areas. We interpret these results as evidence of a decreasing demand for *L'Action Française* in Catholic areas, reshaping the coalition in which *L'Action Française* operated.

6.2 Toward a New Coalition: Attracting a More Secularized Base

According to canon law, the pope appoints bishops, in some instances after consulting other authorities, following the vacancy of the diocese (mostly due to the death of its holder) (Tuñón, 2024). In our study period, because bishops were appointed for life, a pope could only appoint a successor of his liking in a particular diocese at the passing of its bishop. Thus, the timing of the passing of different bishops provides a random variation in the timing of potential appointments by different popes. Under the assumption that a bishop appointed by a given pope was ideologically aligned with him, the variation between bishops (in terms of the papal appointment) provides an as-if-random assigned measure of differences in ideology of the episcopal hierarchy across bishoprics. In 1926, bishops have been appointed by four different popes. As discussed earlier, we specifically distinguish bishops appointed by either Leo XIII or Pius XI from the rest. We hypothesize that those bishops, whom we refer to as *Anti-AF Bishops*, were likely aligned on the pro-democracy/anti-*L'Action Française* doctrines of Leo XIII and Pius XI.¹⁷

To enforce the papal condemnation, the Church denied the administration of sacraments and last rites to

¹⁷Appendix C provides the methodology and the result of this classification.

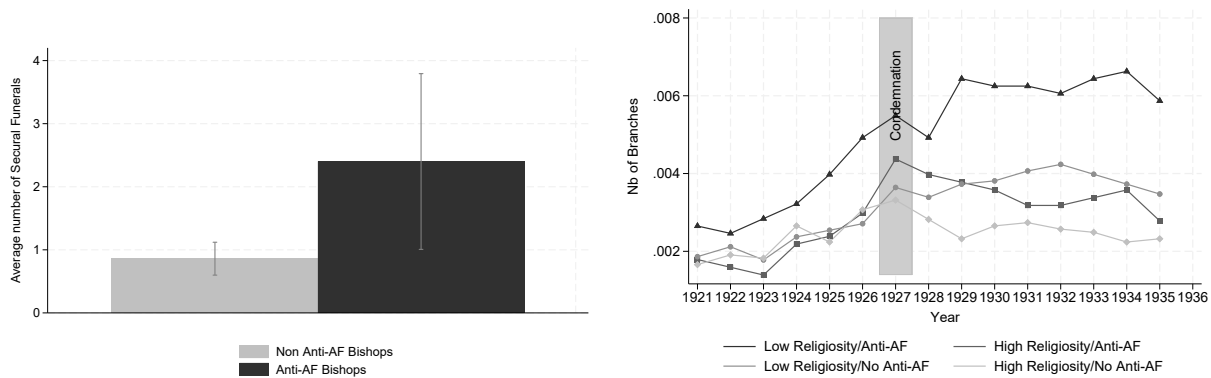
Table 1: The Action Française before and after the Papal condemnation

	(1 .1)	(1.2)	(1.3)	(1.4)	(1.5)	(1.6)	(1.7)	(1.8)	(1.9)
Panel A: Municipal-level estimates									
Dep Variable	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{i,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$
$Post_{1926} \times \%Mass$	-0.00136* (-1.872)	-0.00136* (-1.872)	-0.00136* (-1.872)	-0.00136* (-1.872)	-0.00270*** (-3.325)	-0.00219*** (-2.739)	-0.00151* (-1.924)	-0.00130* (-1.799)	-0.00464*** (-4.485)
Adjusted R-squared	0.00	0.628	0.00	0.628	0.629	0.630	0.628	0.628	0.632
Panel B: Canton-level estimates									
Dep Variable	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$	$AF_{c,t}$
$Post_{1926} \times \%Mass$	-0.0156** (-2.211)	-0.0156** (-2.211)	-0.0156** (-2.211)	-0.0156** (-2.211)	-0.0113* (-1.650)	-0.0254*** (-3.484)	-0.0178** (-2.250)	-0.0144** (-2.063)	-0.0216*** (-2.793)
Adjusted R-squared	0.003	0.617	0.003	0.617	0.621	0.620	0.617	0.618	0.623
<u>Controls:</u>									
Geo FE	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time FE	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pop	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
LaCroix	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Pol	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES
Asso	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES

Models estimated with OLS. Robust z-statistics in parentheses: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Standard errors are clustered at the County-level in all columns. $AF_{i,t}$ is a dummy variable equal to one if a municipality i had an AF branch at time t and zero otherwise. $AF_{c,t}$ is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the number of AF branches at the county level. $\%Mass$ is the share of the population attending Easter Mass in 1919. $Post_{1926}$ is a dummy variable equal to one after 1926. Controls: Population is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the municipality/canton population in 1926. LaCroix is a dummy variable if a municipality/county belongs to a departement of high readership of La Croix in 1893. Pol is the vote share of the Left at the county level in 1919. Asso is the inverse sine transformation of the number of catholic and the number of republican associations at the municipal or county level.

AF members. The enforcement of the prohibition differed across France, arguably as a function of clerical sympathy for AF at the dioceses and parish levels. To examine whether the attitudes and enforcing zeal of bishops had any correspondence with the Pope that had appointed them, Figure 5, left-panel, shows the total number of secular funerals after the condemnation by class of bishop. The results validate our classification. Secular burials, which AF supporters resorted to after the episcopal authorities denied them any religious last rites, were more numerous in places where the bishop was appointed by either Pope Pius XI or by Pope Leo XIII.¹⁸ As an illustration, on average a diocese experienced around 1.4 secular burials after the condemnation. The three dioceses that experienced the highest number of secular burials (Bordeaux, 17; Nimes, 10 and Montpellier, 9) were all under the authority of a bishop appointed either by Pius XI or Leo XIII. Indeed, Bordeaux’s bishop – Paulin Andrieu – was the first bishop to publicize the Papal condemnation of AF.

Figure 5: Clerical Hierarchy and *L’Action Française*



Note: The left panel displays the number of secular funerals in Bishoprics in which an Anti-AF Bishop has been appointed (gray bar) and in which a neutral Bishop has been appointed (black bar). The Right panel displays the mean number of branches created in four categories of municipalities: municipalities with low religiosity and an AntiAF bishop, municipalities with low religiosity and no AntiAF bishop, municipalities with high religiosity and an AntiAF bishop, municipalities with high religiosity and no AntiAF bishop.

Figure 5, right-panel, investigates the joint effects of religiosity and the episcopal hierarchy in more depth. In high-religiosity areas, the number of branches dropped under all types of bishops. That decrease, however, was slightly less pronounced in municipalities under the authority of anti-AF bishops. The only group of municipalities experiencing an increase in the number of branches following the condemnation were low-religiosity municipalities under the authority an anti-AF bishop. The number of branches in low-religiosity municipalities under the authority of the remaining bishops remained stable. We interpret the divergent behavior of low-religiosity areas under an anti-AF bishop as evidence of a social backlash against the Vatican. Table

¹⁸Table A.4 in Appendix confirms this result and details how different types of bishops impacted the number of secular burials using also the timing of secular burials as an additional information when available.

2 estimates the effect of Anti-AF Bishops on the location of branches using Equation (1). The interaction $Post1926_t \times AntiAF_i$ is positive and significant at usual levels. This result remain stable when we control for religiosity, socio-economic control variables, and the number of Catholic, Republican or Veterans' associations.

Table 2: Reorganization and New Objectives: Attracting a More Secularized Base

Dep Variable	(2.1)	(2.2)	(2.3)	(2.4)	(2.5)	(2.6)	(2.7)	(2.8)	(2.9)
	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}	AF _{<i>i,t</i>}
Post ₁₉₂₆ × AntiAF	0.00113** (1.977)	0.00113** (1.977)	0.00113** (1.977)	0.00113** (1.977)	0.00143** (2.459)	0.00133** (2.292)	0.00109** (1.993)	0.00110* (1.934)	0.00154*** (2.719)
Post ₁₉₂₆ × %Mass	-0.00134* (-1.850)	-0.00134* (-1.850)	-0.00134* (-1.849)	-0.00134* (-1.849)	-0.00267*** (-3.309)	-0.00236*** (-2.888)	-0.00143* (-1.854)	-0.00128* (-1.777)	-0.00476*** (-4.531)
Obs	512,580	512,580	512,580	512,580	512,310	487,485	512,580	512,580	487,215
Adjusted R ²	0.000	0.628	0.000	0.628	0.629	0.630	0.628	0.628	0.632
<u>Controls:</u>									
Geo FE	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time FE	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pop	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
LaCroix	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Pol	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES
Asso	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES

Models estimated with OLS. Robust z-statistics in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Standard errors are clustered at the County-level in all columns. AF_{*i,t*} is a dummy variable equal to one if a municipality *i* had an AF branch at time *t* and zero otherwise. AF_{*c,t*} is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the number of AF branches at the county level. %Mass is the share of the population attending Easter Mass in 1919. Post₁₉₂₆ is a dummy variable equal to one after 1926. Controls: Population is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the municipality/canton population in 1926. LaCroix is a dummy variable if a municipality/county belongs to a departement of high readership of La Croix in 1893. Pol is the vote share of the Left at the county level in 1919. Asso is the inverse sine transformation of the number of catholic and the number of republican associations at the municipal or county level.

6.3 A New Organizational Strategy

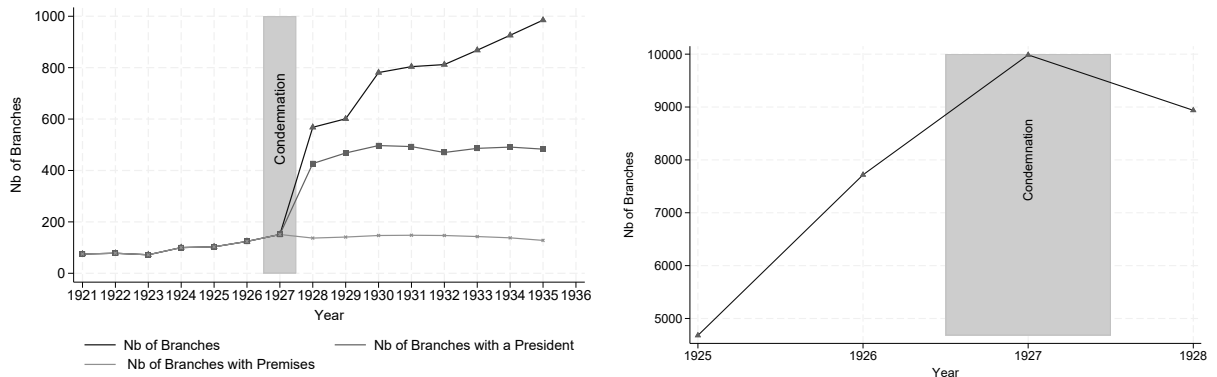
Starting in 1928, *L'Action Française* provided information on two additional types of branches besides the historically reported sections with dedicated premises or “sections ayant une permanence effective” that we have employed in our analysis so far: (1) sections with no premises but one “president” or chair; and (2) “simple” sections with no reference to either premises or president. The left panel of Figure 6 plots the number of all types of sections beyond those with dedicated premises, showing that the shift in AF’s geography and social support examined in the previous section came hand in hand with a transformation in its internal organization.

While the number of branches with premises remained stable, the remaining sections exploded after the condemnation, reaching over eight hundred by the mid-1930s (dark line in Figure 6, left-panel). Even though that growth was mostly driven by sections without president, the number of branches having no premises but a president rose too, mainly in the late 1920s, stabilizing at around 250 thereafter (green line). We interpret these trends as evidence that *L'Action Française* reorganized away from public action, instead prioritizing small scale structures that would allow it to escape both ecclesiastical monitoring and, later on, when its members took a violent turn, state control. This much seems to have been emphasized by the prefect of the Nord département in a report to the French government (Vavasseur-Desperriers, 2008, p.305).

The evolution of AF sections followed the same patterns uncovered in Table 1 for AF branches with premises. As shown in Appendix A.2, which reports the estimations that result from using all branches and branches with president as alternative dependent variables in the models presented in Table 1, the number of branches without premises rose but their increase was less pronounced in religious areas. In turn, Appendix A.3 reproduces the estimations in Table 2 on the effect of type of bishop, now with the new measures. Results go in the same direction, and, in fact, become stronger. AF expanded in low-religiosity areas governed by “repressive bishops”.

The annual number of AF public meetings, plotted in the right panel of Figure 6 for the middle years of the 1920s, peaked the year of the condemnation and began to decrease afterward. As with branches, the number of meetings decreased more in religious than in non-religious areas (Appendix Table A.2).

Figure 6: The New Face of the AF – Measuring the Activity of *L’Action Française*



Left panel: Number of different types of branches. In light-gray, branches with a place to regularly meet (used in baseline estimations). In middle-light gray, branches with a declared president. In dark gray, all types of branches. Right panel: The number of meetings held by *L’Action Française* over time.

7 The Radicalization of *L’Action Française*

Our results so far indicate that the papal condemnation had several crucial effects on Maurras’ movement. First, it halted its development. Second, it did so more strongly in religious areas. Third, it likely gave AF a new motivation to expand: fighting the episcopate. Finally, it pushed *L’Action Française* to develop a new organizational structure—smaller and less public. Taken together, all these effects changed *L’Action Française’s* spatial and social support. After the papal ban, *L’Action Française* reinforced its secular, nationalist worldview, which both appealed less to practicing Catholics and moved AF closer to the anti-parliamentarian far right that rose in strength across Europe in the 1930s.

We turn to document this political mutation of *L’Action Française* by probing three types of evidence. First, we look at the correlation between AF branches and the territorial distribution of the different types of associations – Catholic, and republican. Second, we explore the relationship between AF branches (divided between pre- and post-condemnation years) and the geography of the political violence that swept through France in the 1930s. Finally, we track the transformation of the AF and the support for far right parties in the parliamentary election of 1936. Overall and as time went by, *L’Action Française* increasingly operated in more radical environments, defined in terms of both the presence of political violence and electoral behavior.

7.1 AF and France’s Associational Life

Our first step to probe how *L’Action Française* radicalized, once it became alienated from Church authorities and practicing Catholics, relies on data on the creation of Catholic and republican associations in the

interwar period.¹⁹ The creation of Catholic associations captures the dynamism of the old coalition of *L'Action Française*. We expect the activity of *L'Action Française* to be linked to Catholic associations before the condemnation but less so afterward. Republican associations measure the evolution of movements promoting republican ideals over time – which were the opposite of the objective of *L'Action Française* after the condemnation.

We estimate the extent to which the condemnation interacted with these associations in two ways. First, we investigate how much the condemnation affected them, that is, how the papal announcement may have shaped indirectly the incentives of the population to participate or not in other types of associations linked or opposed to *L'Action Française*. This first set of estimates may be thought of as a placebo test ensuring that no other factor varied at the time of the condemnation that may have impacted other dimensions of social life. Second, we observe the evolution over time of the correlation between the geography of *L'Action Française* and those different types of associations. This second set of estimates captures the changes in coalition created by the condemnation and how much it distorted the relation between *L'Action Française* and other organizations: Catholic, and republican associations.

In columns 3.1 to 3.4 in Table 3, the estimation employs the specification of Equation 1 but changes the dependent variable to the number of creation of either Catholic associations (Columns 3.1 and 3.3) and republican associations (Columns 3.2 and 3.4). We do not observe any change in the creation of Catholic and republican associations in religious areas following the condemnation. This test confirms that no other disruption of social structures close to *L'Action Française* occurred at the time of the condemnation.

¹⁹We assign associations to each type when the title or the description of the associations refers to Catholic or republican respectively.

Table 3: *L'Action Française* and Its New Partners

Dep Variable	(3.1)	(3.2)	(3.3)	(3.4)	(3.5)	(3.6)	(3.7)	(3.8)
	Cath _{<i>i,t</i>}	Rep _{<i>i,t</i>}	Cath _{<i>i,t</i>}	Rep _{<i>i,t</i>}	Cath _{<i>i,t</i>}	Rep _{<i>i,t</i>}	Cath _{<i>i,t</i>}	Rep _{<i>i,t</i>}
Post ₁₉₂₆ × %Mass	1.22e-05 (0.0259)	0.000354 (0.958)	-0.000345 (-0.530)	0.000298 (0.532)			-0.000661 (-1.064)	0.000355 (0.690)
AF _{<i>i,t</i>}					0.0394** (2.425)	0.0129 (0.864)	0.0369** (2.053)	0.0213 (1.304)
Post ₁₉₂₆ × AF _{<i>i,t</i>}					-0.0608*** (-3.331)	0.00145 (0.0794)	-0.0515** (-2.519)	-0.00466 (-0.230)
Adj R ²	0.180	0.209	0.180	0.209	0.176	0.194	0.181	0.209
<u>Controls:</u>								
Geo FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pop	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
LaCroix	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
Pol	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES

Models estimated with OLS. Robust z-statistics in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Standard errors are clustered at the County-level in all columns. AF_{*i,t*} is a dummy variable equal to one if a municipality *i* had an AF branch at time *t* and zero otherwise. AF_{*c,t*} is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the number of AF branches at the county level. %Mass is the share of the population attending Easter Mass in 1919. Post₁₉₂₆ is a dummy variable equal to one after 1926. Controls: Population is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the municipality/canton population in 1926. LaCroix is a dummy variable if a municipality/county belongs to a departement of high readership of La Croix in 1893. Pol is the vote share of the Left at the county level in 1919. Asso is the inverse sine transformation of the number of catholic and the number of republican associations at the municipal or county level.

Columns 3.4 to 3.8 include controls for the presence of AF branches – alone and in interaction with the papal condemnation. The correlation between the location of AF branches and the creation of “Catholic associations changed after the condemnation. Whereas the presence of AF sections predicted well the creation of Catholic associations before the condemnation (Columns 3.4 and 3.8), that correlation became negative afterward. We do not observe an effect on republican associations.

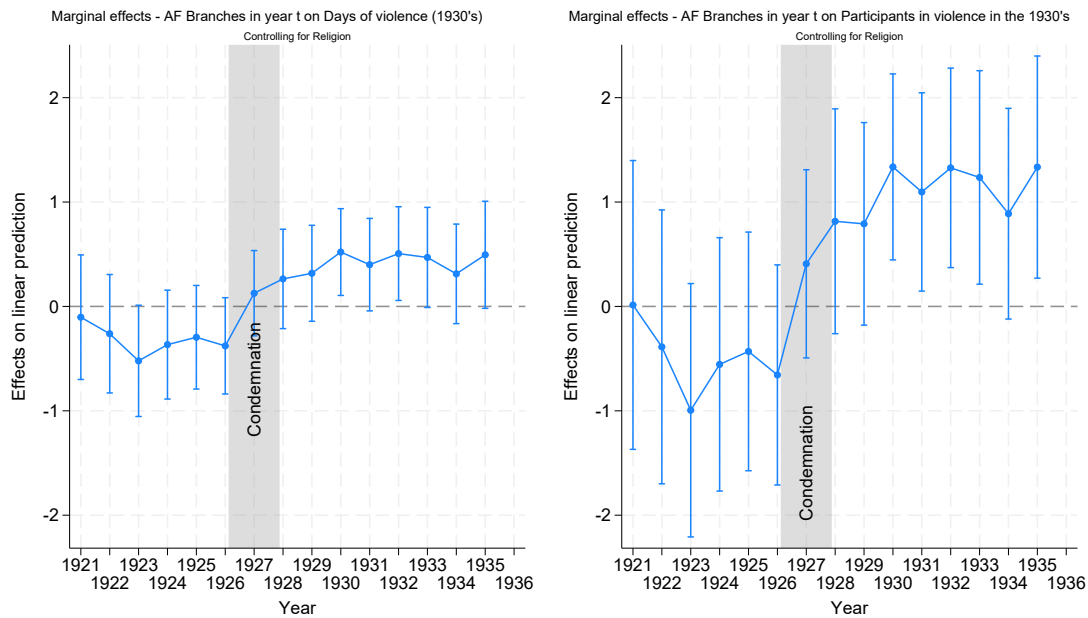
7.2 Political Violence

In the context of the Great Depression of 1929, a sharp increase in unemployment rates, and the rise of the Nazi party to power in Berlin, AF and, in particular its most violent affiliate, the Camelots du Roi, became increasingly involved in street altercations with left-wing parties and trade unionists, in university riots, and, eventually and jointly with other right-wing groups, in a tumultuous march on Palais Bourbon, the meeting place of the National Assembly, on February 6, 1934, that resulted in sixteen deaths and over 2,000 injured people.

To examine the relationship between AF and political violence, we rely on Tilly and Zambrano (1989), a study identifying events as instances of political violence if they involved at least “50 persons and resulted in

seizure, injury or damage to at least one person or object that occurred in public places within continental France”.²⁰ Figure 7, left-panel, presents the correlation between the number of AF branches in a given year and the number of days of violence in the 1930s. Figure 7, right-panel, presents these coefficients for the number of participants in violence in the 1930s. Right after the condemnation, the correlation coefficients between AF branches and violence increased and moved from negative or null to positive and significant. Results are similar if we just control for population levels (left panel) or if we add religion as an extra control (right panel).

Figure 7: AF and Polarization – Violence



Note: Yearly coefficients of correlation between the number of AF branches and Days of violence in the 1930s (left-panel) and participants in violence in the 1930s (right-panel). Each figure presents these coefficients once controlling for the interaction between population interacted with a post-1926 dummy variable and religion interacted with a post-1926 dummy variable. Figures controlling only for Population and its interaction available in Appendix B.2.

Table 4 estimates the correlation between political violence in the 1930s and the number of AF branches per *département*. We consider the number of branches before and after the condemnation in separate models (odd and even columns respectively). We then compare the correlation coefficients between violence in the 1930s and the location of branches created before or after the condemnation. Any difference between these correlation coefficients (if any) may result from either the causal effect of branches on violence or the fact that the location of branches changed over time. To partially disentangle these two components, we control for population size in all models. We then add as controls the measures of religiosity and bishops’

²⁰The codebook of this study is available here ICPSR - Codebook

identity in Columns 3, 4, 7 and 8 in Table 4.

Table 4: *L'Action Française* and the Polarization of French Society: Violence

Dep Variable	(4.1)	(4.2)	(4.3)	(4.4)	(4.5)	(4.6)	(4.7)	(4.8)
	Days _d				Participants _d			
AF ₁₉₂₆ (β_1)	-0.478*		-0.453*		-0.879		-0.820	
	(-1.930)		(-1.782)		(-1.546)		(-1.424)	
AF ₁₉₃₅ (β_2)		0.534*		0.554*		1.444**		1.493**
		(1.755)		(1.736)		(2.262)		(2.274)
p($\beta_1=\beta_2$)	0.01***		0.01**		0.01***		0.01***	
<u>Control</u>								
Population	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Religion	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES

Note: Models estimated with OLS. Robust z-statistics in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Dependent variable – Columns 1-4: Days of violence_{1930's} is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the number of violent events in a departement during the 1930s. Columns 5-8: Participants in violence_{1930's} is the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation of the number of participants in violent events in a departement during the 1930s. Odd Columns estimate the correlation between the number of branches in a departement in 1926 and violence in the 1930s. Even Columns estimate the correlation between the number of branches in a departement in 1935 and violence in the 1930s. Columns 1, 2, 5 and 6 only control for population in 1926. Columns 3, 4, 7 and 8 control for both the population in 1926 and the two measures of religion used in the article: % Mass and Anti-AF Bishops. The line p-value Test ($\beta_1=\beta_2$) provides a Wald test of equality of coefficients for the same specifications when using either the number of branches in 1926 or the number of branches in 1935 as independent variable of interest.

By controlling for religion, we account for the geographic reorganization of AF along religious lines following the condemnation. Following these estimations, we systematically compare the coefficients attached to the number of branches created before the condemnation to those attached to the number of branches created after the condemnation.

Columns 4.1 and 4.3 present the correlation between the total number of days of violence in the 1930s and the number of branches in 1926. The two coefficients are negative and the coefficient not controlling for religion is statistically significant at the ten-percent level. Columns 4.2 and 4.4 examine, in turn, the correlation between the number of days of violence in the 1930s and the number of branches in 1935. The coefficients are positive and significant at the ten-percent level. More crucially, the tests of equality of coefficients across comparable models using alternately the number of branches before the condemnation or the number of branches after the condemnation as main independent variable are significant at the five or at the one percent level. Accordingly, the correlation between the number of branches of *L'Action Française* and violence changed over time. Since our measure of violence is time-invariant, this difference in the coefficients can only be explained by the difference in location of the branches of *L'Action Française*. The geography of *L'Action Française* after the condemnation correlated with violence whereas it was not

the case for branches created before the condemnation.

Columns 4.5 to 4.8 confirm this result using the number of participants in violence as the dependent variable. Political violence was higher in those departments in which *L'Action Française* was the most present in 1935. The opposite was the case for those departments in which *L'Action Française* was stronger in 1926.

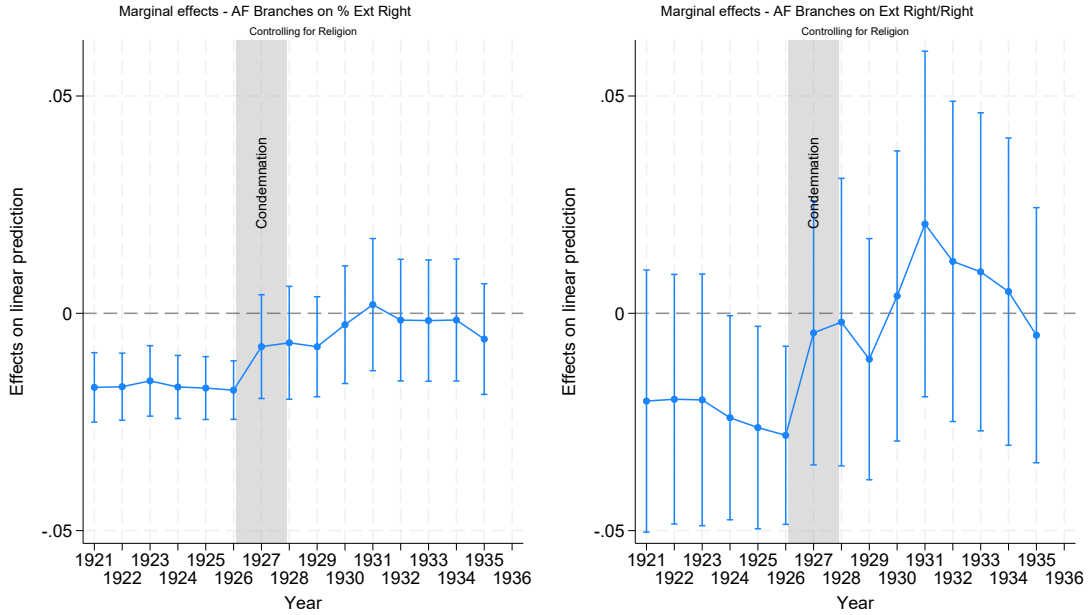
7.3 The Rise of the Far Right

Over the course of the interwar period, AF moved from participating in France's elections often in coalition with right and center-right candidacies to adopting a frontally anti-parliamentarian stance and flirting with anti-system, far right parties. We investigate this shift by looking at the correlation between the location of branches (before and after the condemnation) and voting in the election of 1936, which was highly polarized and saw the emergence of a strong anti-parliamentarian right. We define the anti-parliamentarian or Far Right as encompassing the Royalists, the Agrarians, the Patriots Youth, French National Socialists, anti-parliamentarian candidates, and members of the Francisque.

Figure 8, left-panel, shows the evolution over time of the correlation between the location of AF branches and the vote share for Far Right candidates in 1936. The left panel plots the point estimates (and confidence intervals) without control variables for religiosity and bishops' identity. The right panel includes them. Figure 8, right-panel engages in the same exercise for the correlation between yearly AF branches and the share of Far Right candidates over total Right candidates. The pre-condemnation coefficients are negative: the location of pre-condemnation branches predicts a lower vote share for the Far Right in 1936. This results emphasize the role of *L'Action Française* within a conservative Right before the condemnation. The members that formed a coalition with *L'Action Française* before the condemnation could attract conservative voters but did not turn to the Far Right in 1936. The coefficients attached to the number of branches before the condemnation have similar magnitude. Hence, the ideology of branches was similar for branches created just after the First World War and in 1926: no pre-trend explain a future shift in political ideology. After the papal condemnation, the coefficients turned to be not different from zero. Accordingly, branches created after the condemnation were created in places that ultimately voted differently from places in which pre-condemnation branches were created. Post-condemnation branches were less immune to the anti-parliamentarian right.

As in the previous subsection, Columns 1 through 4 in Table 5 compare the correlation coefficients between the vote share for the Far Right and the number of branches in 1926 and in 1935 (even and odd columns

Figure 8: AF and Political Polarization



Note: Yearly coefficients of correlation between the number of AF branches and the vote share for the Far Right in 1936 (left-panel) and the vote share of the far-right within the right (right-panel). Each figure presents these coefficients once controlling for the interaction between population interacted with a post-1926 dummy variable and religion interacted with a post-1926 dummy variable. Figures controlling only for Population and its interaction available in Appendix B.3.

respectively). Columns 5.5 to 5.8 repeat the same analysis for the share of Far Right votes over votes for the Right. All models in Table 5 control for population. In Columns 3, 4, 7 and 8, we add controls for religion.

Table 5: *L'Action Française* and the Polarization of French society: Far Right

Dep Variable	(5.1)	(5.2)	(5.3)	(5.4)	(5.5)	(5.6)	(5.7)	(5.8)
	FarRight ₁₉₃₆				$\frac{FarRight_{1936}}{Right_{1936}}$			
AF ₁₉₂₆ (β_1)	-0.0157*** (-4.341)		-0.0185*** (-5.214)		-0.0168 (-1.301)		-0.0297*** (-2.805)	
AF ₁₉₃₅ (β_2)		-0.00487 (-0.768)		-0.00628 (-0.940)		0.00536 (0.328)		-0.00656 (-0.423)
$p(\beta_1=\beta_2)$	0.07*		0.06*		0.07*		0.09*	
<u>Control</u>								
Population	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Religion	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES

Note: Models estimated with OLS. Robust z-statistics in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Dependent variable – Columns 1-4: Vote share for the Far right in 1936 in the Canton. Columns 5-8: Vote share for the Far Right divide by the vote share for the Right in 1936. Odd Columns estimate the correlation between the number of branches in a departement in 1926 and violence in the 1930s. Even Columns estimate the correlation between the number of branches in a departement in 1935 and violence in the 1930s. Columns 1, 2, 5 and 6 only control for population in 1926. Columns 3, 4, 7 and 8 control for both the population in 1926 and the two measures of religion used in the article: % Mass and Anti-AF Bishops. The line p-value Test ($\beta_1=\beta_2$) provides a Wald test of equality of coefficients for the same specifications when using either the number of branches in 1926 or the number of branches in 1935 as independent variable of interest.

The coefficients of correlation imply that doubling the number of branches in 1926 coincided with a

decrease of the vote share of the Far Right in 1936 by around 2 to 3 percentage points. These results confirm that AF's old coalition did not match the social support of the Far Right emerging in 1936. They also intimate that the Church intervention successfully clamped down on the AF in religious areas – altering the nature of that movement's support. In turn, the coefficients attached to the number of branches in 1935 all are very close to zero and insignificant. A test of inequality shows that the correlation coefficients are statistically different at the ten-percent level when changing from number of branches in 1926 to number of branches in 1935 as the main explanatory variable. Hence, a shift in correlation occurred after the condemnation. *L'Action Française* became closer to a new anti-parliamentary right. The correlation coefficients are extremely similar across the two dependent variables assessing the importance of the Far Right we use. This suggests that the shift in correlation we estimate emerges as the result of a transfer of voters within the Right. In Table A.5 in the Appendix, we observe that the correlation between the number of branches and the vote share of the right and of the moderate right did not vary over time once we control for selection.²¹

Branches created after the condemnation were different from those created before. Again, the condemnation shifted the correlation between branches and voting for different Rights. New branches nurtured the Far Right whereas old branches remained loyal to the old, more centrist coalition. These results remain stable after we control for religion. Only the 1936 elections, the first ones with anti-parliamentarian candidates, display such a pattern.²² Accordingly, these results more probably reflect the willingness of *L'Action Française* to promote anti-parliamentarism than its self-selection into areas prone to follow this message.

8 Conclusion

Massive political shocks, such as war defeats, and acute economic crises often result in the partisan realignment of a substantial part of the electorate. However, elites usually act as the midwives of that process of electoral change: they interpret crises both in terms of their causes and solutions; they provide a focal point to coordinate voters around new alternatives; and they control organizations and ideologies that can deter or foster that change. The interwar period is a case in point. World War I, hyperinflation and the Great Depression triggered the rise of new, normally radical forces across the political spectrum (Achen

²¹We consider the Démocratie Populaire, of the Action Populaire, the Republican of the Left and the Radical Independent as part of the moderate right. The Right encompasses parties mentioned as part of the far right, parties of the moderate right and U. R. D.; Federation Republicaine; Conservateur; Concentration republicaine et sociale.

²²Appendix A.6 displays placebo tests using estimates using the vote share in the 1928 and 1932 elections and do not observe similar discontinuities.

and Bartels, 2017; De Juan et al., 2021). But their ultimate success hinged on momentous strategic choices made by political and social elites – such as the army, trade unions, business associations or churches.

In this paper, we leverage the decision of Pope Pius XI to ban any Catholic involvement in *L'Action Française* to document elites' influence on the reorganization of the political arena in interwar France and, in particular, the French Right. *L'Action Française*, a highly influential intellectual and political movement led by Charles Maurras since the Dreyfus affair, benefited from a strong Catholic following in the 1920s. Following the papal condemnation of 1926, the territorial distribution, social support and organizational structure of AF shifted decisively. *L'Action Française* lost steam among practicing Catholics while attracting a more secularized base that gave more weight to the movement's nationalist, xenophobic and antisemitic positions. That programmatic radicalization was accompanied by an even stronger opposition to the parliamentary politics of the French Republic. While *L'Action Française* supported some non-extremist candidates in the legislative elections of 1919 and 1924, in 1928 it disavowed the mere principle of elections. By the middle of the 1930s, members of *L'Action Française* were participating in direct violent actions and the organization itself had become explicitly entangled with a growing anti-parliamentarian movement.

Besides confirming the fact that the papal condemnation was a turning point for *L'Action Française* (Prévotat, 2001, 2004; Dard, 2008; Weber, 1964), we contribute to at least three main research agendas: the role of political elites in general, the political economy of religion, and the evolution of mass politics in the critical period that preceded World War II in Europe.

First, we document how social and religious elites play a pivotal role in affecting political organizations and their supporting coalition. More precisely, we show that a particular strategic choice by religious elites forced AF supporters to choose between their allegiance to the condemning elite and their membership to the condemned organization. As a result, that elite intervention likely re-balanced the legitimacy and support of both the democratic Right and the anti-parliamentarian Far Right. We document this effect along two dimensions: the organization of the AF (geography and activities) and the program of the AF. Our results add to and expand a recent literature showing how elites endorse and diffuse particular political views across the electorate (Garthwaite and Moore, 2013; Cagé et al., 2023; Wang, 2021).

Second, we explore the interaction between religious affiliation and political mobilization. Although political preferences are often correlated with religious attitudes and practice (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967;

Warner, 2000; Gehler and Kaiser, 2004; Boix et al., 2021), the papal decision of 1926 and its effects show that the impact of religion in political preferences is not set in stone: religious elites can shape the political articulation of religious interests in different ways (Kalyvas, 1996; Tuñón, 2024).

Third, our focus on the role of non-political elites sheds new light the political dynamics that resulted in the democratic crises of the 1930s. Even though the collapse of democracy was related to deep, long-run factors ranging from the lingering effects of WWI to the rise of unemployment after 1929, elites' actions shaped the political outcomes before (and during) World War II. The condemnation of 1926 sucked a lot of political air away from AF, in the process reinforcing a moderate Right and arguably stabilizing the republican center in France. The Catholic Church played equally important roles (even though in opposite directions) in other European countries. In Germany, it shored up popular support for the Catholic party, Zentrum, against the Nazi party. In Spain, with the partial exception of some Basque and Catalan bishops, it supported the Franco coup against the republic (Spenkuch and Tillmann, 2018; Peisakhin and Queralt, 2022). Protestant churches were relevant too in the legitimation of Hitler's regime after a sizable of the Evangelical Church endorsed its policies (Hockenos, 2004).

To conclude, we believe that the study of the interplay between the AF and the Catholic hierarchy improves our understanding of the relationship between religion and secular politics in a variety of contexts beyond the interwar period: from the condemnation of the IRA by part of the Church or the condemnation of ISIS by numerous Muslim authorities to Buddhist monks fighting the junta in Myanmar.²³ Explaining the evolution of these organizations requires identifying the levers used by religious leaders to shape them.

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²³See: Time Archives - Consulted on November 28, 2024; France 24 - Consulted on November 28, 2024; and Wilson Center Website - Consulted on November 28, 2024.

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