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Raymond Kuhn

The victory of François Hollande over Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round of the 2012 presidential election was the first success for the left in France's top political contest since François Mitterrand's re-election in 1988 and brought to an end a run of three straight defeats for the Socialists (1995, 2002 and 2007). The final result was no great surprise. While the two main contenders had vigorously fought to occupy the lead position in the first round of voting, for several months Hollande had consistently been the clear leader in the opinion polls to win the decisive second round run-off. Sarkozy was the first incumbent candidate not to gain pole position in the first round and only the second not to secure re-election, emulating the failure of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the 1981 contest against Mitterrand.

Hollande's election was followed by a clear victory for the left in the parliamentary contest in June, with the Socialist party and its closest allies gaining an overall majority without the need for the support of other groups on the left such as Europe Écologie-Les Verts (the Greens) and the Front de gauche (a leftist coalition that included the Communists). President Hollande thus obtained strong parliamentary backing for his reform agenda, while the regime's dominant institutional model based on mutually supportive presidential and parliamentary majorities now worked in favour of the left as it had for the right in 2002 and 2007 (Levy and Skach 2008). Indeed, with the Socialist party also controlling the Senate and the overwhelming majority of regional and departmental councils, Hollande benefited from a more dominant position in the French political system than even Mitterrand had enjoyed when the Socialists first won the presidency in 1981.

The Presidential Election: First Round (22 April)

The ninth presidential election since de Gaulle's 1962 constitutional amendment introduced election of the head of state by direct universal suffrage (Winock 2008) was contested over two rounds, with a single national constituency that included voters from overseas departments and territories as well as French citizens living abroad (Vedel 2007). Ten candidates (seven men and three women) obtained the minimum 500 sponsoring signatures from local mayors and regional councillors (see Table 1).

Only two candidates—Sarkozy (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, UMP) and François Bayrou (Mouvement Démocrate, MoDem)—had previously stood in a presidential election. The ideological spectrum was extensive, ranging from Marine Le Pen (Front National, FN) on the extreme right to Philippe Poutou (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste) and Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte ouvrière) on the extreme left. In addition to Hollande (Parti Socialiste, PS), the other candidates were Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la République), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Front de gauche), Eva Joly (Europe Écologie-Les Verts, EELV) and the idiosyncratically eccentric Jacques Cheminade (Solidarité et Progrès).

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TABLE 1

Number of candidates in the first round of the presidential election (1965-2012)

1965	6
1969	7
1974	12
1981	10
1988	9
1995	9
2002	16
2007	12
2012	10

Sources: Winock (2008); French Constitutional Council (<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

The long unofficial campaign seriously began in May 2011 with the shocking revelation of the arrest of the head of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, in a case of alleged sexual assault and attempted rape of a hotel chambermaid in New York (Bacqué and Chemin 2012). Previously widely tipped as the favourite to win the Socialist party nomination, Strauss-Kahn saw his presidential ambitions and political career rapidly come to an effective end, soon acquiring in some media the unenviable status of 'ex-future probable president'. In October the Socialist party held primary contests in which all citizens who expressed support for the values of the left, not just party members as in 2007, were invited to participate. The exercise was a huge success in terms of media coverage (including four television debates) and electoral participation (over two and a half million votes cast in each round). Ségolène Royal, the party's defeated candidate in the 2007 presidential election, was one of four candidates eliminated in the first round. Hollande (56.57%) comfortably won the second round run-off against the party's leader, Martine Aubry (43.43%), who had previously been regarded as a supporter of Strauss-Kahn's candidacy.

In contrast to the public competition for the Socialist nomination, Sarkozy was given a clear run within his own political formation. Other possible UMP candidates, such as the prime minister, François Fillon, and the general secretary of the party, Jean-François Copé, held their fire for 2017, while the foreign minister, Alain Juppé, maintained himself in reserve in case Sarkozy unexpectedly withdrew from the race. More broadly across the mainstream right, possible alternative candidacies to that of the incumbent failed to materialise. The Radical party leader, Jean-Louis Borloo, one of Sarkozy's disaffected ministers who had been regarded as a possible prime minister in 2010, failed to throw his hat in the ring, while the president's arch-rival on the right, Jacques Chirac's former prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, also saw a potential candidacy come to nothing. There was thus no repeat on the right of the first round fratricidal battles that had been such a feature of earlier presidential contests in the Fifth Republic (1974, 1981, 1988 and 1995).

Instead the main first round threat to Sarkozy came from the new leader of the FN, Marine Le Pen, the daughter of the former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen who had stood in five previous presidential elections and had in spectacular fashion won through to the second round in 2002. Some opinion polls in 2011 even pointed to the possibility of Marine Le Pen eliminating Sarkozy in the first round. Her high polling scores were evidence of the resurgence of the FN following her father's disappointing result in the 2007 presidential election and testified to the success of her strategy of making the party more acceptable to a wider electorate. Once Le

Pen's challenge to Sarkozy receded in the polls, however, the likelihood of a Sarkozy–Hollande run-off became the dominant media framing of the contest from the autumn of 2011 onwards.

Public interest in the campaign, as measured by opinion polls and voters' media consumption, was not as high as in 2007 when not only had the two leading contenders represented a clear generational break with their immediate predecessors at the Elysée, but one of them had also been the first woman in the history of the Fifth Republic to have a serious chance of winning the top office (Kuhn 2007). In contrast, in 2012 Sarkozy was a well-known quantity with a presidential record to defend, while Hollande lacked the charismatic appeal that had been such a notable feature of Royal's mediated image five years previously.

Since his election in 2007 Sarkozy had presented himself as a 'hyperactive' president, involving himself in executive decision-making across all policy fields and relegating his ministers, including the prime minister, to a clear secondary status. He had introduced some important reforms, such as university autonomy, the provision of a minimum service during public sector strikes and the raising of the retirement age (Hewlett 2011). Much of his presidency had been dominated by the global financial and economic crisis, with its consequences for the single European currency, national economic growth and French employment prospects. While the economic record of France under his stewardship was certainly not disastrous, especially when compared with that of some other major eurozone countries such as Italy and Spain, it failed to live up to the expectations raised by his election in 2007 when he had promised to defend living standards and boost employment. The downgrading of France's triple-A credit rating by Standard & Poor's in January 2012 was a symbolic blow to the president's claim to financial competence, while the significant rise in unemployment during his five-year term (an increase of between 750,000 and one million depending on the methodology used) and the hugely increased level of national debt as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) (from 63.9% in 2007 to over 85.8% in 2011) were important negative indicators of his overall performance in office. In terms of his image Sarkozy was frequently presented as the 'president of the rich', an evocation of his early budgetary measures to protect the better off and of his close relations with top business owners and chief executives, including an assortment of media tycoons. This image of a president out of touch with the concerns of ordinary voters made it difficult for him convincingly to put across his message during the long eurozone crisis about the need to make capitalism more ethical and to eliminate offshore tax havens.

In 2007 Sarkozy had vaunted the importance of a 'right without any complexes', emphasising traditional right-wing values of authority, order and hard work. On the issues of crime, immigration and race relations, he had as president continued to affirm a series of right-wing commitments. Indeed, his speech in September 2010 which targeted the Roma community in France showed the typical excesses of Sarkozy's populist discourse. His propensity to promise legislative reform in response to events of criminality, without frequently the essential follow-through in terms of resource allocation, diminished his status among a section of public opinion. As had happened to Prime Minister Blair in the UK, the primacy of communication over delivery itself became an important media news story as the Sarkozy presidency evolved. During the campaign Sarkozy adopted an unashamedly rightist strategy in an attempt to replicate his success in 2007 of winning over FN voters. However, the perceived excesses of this strategy were much criticised in sections of the

media for giving too much publicity and legitimacy to the views of the extreme right (Gourevitch 2012).

For much of his term Sarkozy was the most unpopular president in the history of the Fifth Republic. He was often evaluated by voters as more unpopular than Prime Minister Fillon, which seemed to indicate that electoral hostility towards the president was to a significant extent driven more by a dislike of his style rather than opposition to his policies. Some of Sarkozy's unpopularity may have been outside his control—a product of a more intense and critical media focus on democratic political leaders than had been the case in the past. However, clearly Sarkozy himself was in part responsible for the steep downward trend in his opinion poll ratings. His public emphasis on his private life, notably the exposure of his relations with his second wife, Cécilia, and his new companion, Carla Bruni, in late 2007, shocked the sensibilities of many voters, including the elderly and practising Catholics among his own supporters. His mediated concern with his own personal fulfilment also clashed with the traditional focus in France on the perceived dignified role of the president as a sacerdotal leadership figure and symbolic representative of the nation (Nay 2012). The perception that Sarkozy's actions did not always fit with the template of a head of state was confirmed by his linguistic excesses at times of anger, most famously his outburst '*Casse-toi, pauv' con*' ('Get lost, asshole') in response to a member of the public who refused to shake hands with him in February 2008 (Kuhn 2010: 370). His consistently low popularity scores in voter surveys meant that during the campaign Sarkozy often came across as the challenger rather than the incumbent, while in an odd transfer of roles Hollande frequently assumed the 'presidential' mantle.

Hollande certainly had several of the classic attributes of a French presidential candidate (Raffy 2011). He was a graduate of both the Political Science Institute in Paris and of the civil service training school, the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, and had for 10 years been the leader of the Socialist party in opposition. During that period the Socialists had won some stunning successes in second-order elections, notably the regional contest in 2004 (Kuhn 2005), without being able to emulate these victories in the first-order presidential and parliamentary contests of 2002 and 2007. However, Hollande lacked one attribute that every other successful presidential candidate in the Fifth Republic had possessed: ministerial experience. Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou and Chirac had all served as prime minister before becoming president; Mitterrand had occupied various ministerial posts during the Fourth Republic in the 1950s; Giscard d'Estaing had been minister of finance under both de Gaulle and Pompidou; and Sarkozy had served as minister of the interior and minister of finance during Chirac's second presidential term. In contrast, Hollande had never occupied a ministerial post during Mitterrand's presidency, even at a junior level.

Moreover, as head of the Socialists Hollande had acquired the reputation of a consensus-seeking party manager rather than a strong leader. That approach had shown its limitations during the 2005 EU referendum campaign when the Socialist party hierarchy publicly divided over how to vote, thus contributing to the defeat of the 'Yes' camp which Hollande and the party had officially supported. The EU referendum result represented the nadir of Hollande's fortunes as party leader. His leadership credentials were never really to recover, and in the wake of Royal's defeat in the 2007 presidential election Hollande gave up the post and remained largely aloof from the divisive struggle between Royal and Aubry for the party leadership at the Reims congress in 2008. With hindsight, this period of relative withdrawal worked to his benefit as his competitors in the Socialist party for the presidential nomination successively fell by the wayside. After her leadership bid failure Royal was unable to establish a solid platform in a party in which many elite figures had little respect for her abilities and

many members had lost faith in her capacity to win; Strauss-Kahn's presidential ambitions exploded spectacularly in New York; and Aubry, who had only belatedly displayed a clear desire to run for the presidential office, failed sufficiently to enthuse beyond the confines of the party.

During the campaign Hollande laid out a strategy based on a projected image of himself as an 'ordinary candidate' (*'candidat normal'*) to emphasise the difference between himself on the one hand and both the 'bling bling' President Sarkozy and the hedonistic Strauss-Kahn on the other. He did not mediatise his private life for campaign purposes. In this he had, perhaps, little choice, since relations with his former partner, Royal, were strained, while there was arguably more to be lost than gained by trying to play up his new relationship with the political journalist, Valérie Trierweiler. One of his concerns was to avoid burn out over the long campaign, hence his attempt (by no means successful) to step back from significant media exposure after his success in the primaries.

Hollande's campaign slogan *'Le changement c'est maintenant'* ('Time for change') consciously echoed Mitterrand's reformist campaign in 1981 when the left had won the presidency for the first time (Hollande 2012). Yet, while the PS candidate was at pains to make many references to the values of his predecessor, there was no ideological commitment to a 'change of society' and 'break with capitalism' as Mitterrand had rhetorically advocated. The creation of the single European market and currency, the interdependence of the global economy and the growth in the power of the financial markets had manifestly changed the economic context for a Socialist presidential candidate in the intervening three decades, while the steep decline of the Communist party had radically altered the ideological and electoral contexts within the French left. Instead Hollande engaged in a pragmatic balancing act in terms of policy proposals. He was not from the left wing of the Socialist party, but nor had he ever supported a Blairite-style compromise with financial and economic power holders. He advocated the occasional radical measure, such as the introduction of a 75% marginal tax rate on high earners, in an attempt to appeal to potential Mélenchon voters, but he was also conscious of the need not to make excessive promises or raise voter expectations at a time of financial austerity and limited state funds. His main campaign themes focused on the economy, employment, education and youth. He also constantly emphasised the negative aspects of Sarkozy's record—an easy but potentially highly rewarding card to play in a contest where antipathy to Sarkozy among voters was stronger than their attachment to any particular alternative candidate, including Hollande.

The third candidate in the pecking order of the opinion polls was Marine Le Pen, who had formally inherited the party's leadership from her father in a dynastic succession at the start of 2011. She had attempted to 'detoxify' the FN brand by eschewing some of her father's more outrageous statements, normalising party pronouncements and presenting the party as a respectable haven for mainstream right-wing voters disaffected with the failures of the Sarkozy presidency (Fourest and Venner 2011). She also tried to make the party more acceptable to women voters, who had tended to shun the party under her father's leadership. Yet, this did not prevent her from campaigning on a populist programme designed to appeal to those who had lost out from change in the French economy and society. She was strong on anti-globalisation, anti-EU and anti-Islam, even managing to put the issue of the serving of halal meat in state school refectories on to the campaign agenda for a short time.

In addition to Le Pen, the other candidates in the posse of three pursuing the two front-runners were Mélenchon and Bayrou. Mélenchon was a former member of the PS who had gone off to campaign on a more leftist platform within a new party founded in 2008, the

Parti de gauche. After a series of humiliating results for their candidates in previous presidential elections, the Communist party decided not to put up a candidate of its own in 2012 and instead chose to ally with the *Parti de gauche* in supporting Mélenchon's candidacy under the umbrella title of *Front de gauche*. Mélenchon fought a highly personalised campaign, with well-attended public rallies (Place de la Bastille in Paris, Marseilles, Toulouse) that gained a lot of positive media coverage. His main objectives were to anchor Hollande in ideological terms as much to the left as possible and to come ahead of Le Pen in the battle for the so-called *vote populaire* (working- and lower-middle-class vote).

In contrast, Bayrou was attempting once again to deny the bipolarising pressures of left-right electoral competition in the Fifth Republic by defending the values of an independent centre. In 2009 he had published a well-written book that was highly critical of Sarkozy's presidential tenure (Bayrou 2009). However, since Bayrou's organisational support was limited and his party base small, his candidacy was highly dependent on the media if it were to gain national resonance with voters during the campaign. In the event he obtained significantly less media coverage than in 2007 because not only was he not regarded as a potential victor in 2012, he was not even seen as a possible king-maker. To put it simply, Bayrou struggled to make his voice heard.

The election agenda covered a range of issues, notably the economy, employment, education, law and order and social integration. While the ongoing eurozone crisis and France's economic situation provided a constant media backdrop to the campaign, the main news story that for a short time threatened to derail the plans of the candidates' communication advisors was the fatal shooting in the south-west of France by a young French citizen of Algerian extraction, Mohammed Merah, of three soldiers and, in a separate incident, of a teacher and three children at a Jewish school. For a short time the campaign was suspended to allow for a period of national grieving. Speculation that the killings might allow Sarkozy to steal a march on his rivals by assuming the mantle of national leader or aid Le Pen in her defence of so-called traditional French values proved to be unfounded, and the impact on the campaign agenda of the sequence of events, including the killing of Merah by the police, was negligible.

At over 80% of the registered electorate, turnout was high, albeit lower than in 2007 (see Table 2).

The results of the first round of the 2012 presidential election are given in Table 3. Hollande won the battle to occupy the psychologically important top spot. His first round share of the vote (28.63%) was higher than that secured by Royal in 2007 (25.87%) and by

TABLE 2

Level of turnout in first round of presidential elections 1965-2012
(as percentage of registered electorate)

1965	84.75
1969	77.59
1974	84.23
1981	81.09
1988	81.35
1995	78.38
2002	71.60
2007	83.77
2012	79.48

Sources: *Le Monde*, 24 April 2012; French Constitutional Council (<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

TABLE 3
 Presidential election result, 2012: first round

Registered voters	46,028,542	
Abstentions	9,444,143	20.52 (% of registered voters)
Votes	36,584,399	79.48
Spoiled ballots	701,190	1.52
Valid votes	35,883,209	77.96
François Hollande	10,272,705	28.63 (% of valid votes)
Nicolas Sarkozy	9,753,629	27.18
Marine Le Pen	6,421,426	17.90
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	3,984,822	11.10
François Bayrou	3,275,122	9.13
Eva Joly	828,345	2.31
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan	643,907	1.79
Philippe Poutou	411,160	1.15
Nathalie Arthaud	202,548	0.56
Jacques Cheminade	89,545	0.25

Source: French Constitutional Council (<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

Mitterrand in 1981 (25.84%). Among other things Hollande benefited from the desire of many voters across the left to cast a so-called ‘useful vote’ (*vote utile*), so as not to repeat the fragmentation of the left which had functioned with such disastrous consequences in 2002. Hollande scored above 30% among the professional middle classes and in the 25–34 age group. He was also slightly more popular with women (30%) than men (27%), even managing to achieve a higher vote share among female voters than Royal had managed in 2007 (27%). In contrast, he secured a lower proportion of the 18–24 age group (29%) than his former partner had done five years previously (34%). While Hollande did not do particularly well among the over 60s, he did secure the vote of one elderly voter—former President Chirac, who, like Hollande, had represented a constituency in the Corrèze department in south-west France and whose support for Hollande was borne out of personal animosity towards Sarkozy rather than approval of the Socialist candidate’s policies.

Sarkozy’s vote share (27.18%) was well down on his score five years previously (31.18%) when he had successfully siphoned many votes away from the FN candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In 2012 this strategy was much less successful, in part because of Marine Le Pen’s image and in part because many FN voters were disappointed with the lack of clear policy results of the Sarkozy presidency on issues key to them, such as immigration and crime. Sarkozy achieved a higher vote share among women (28%) than men (24%) and did particularly well in the over 60 age range (36%). He also had a high vote share among skilled tradesmen, small shopkeepers and company managers (40%).

There was no major shock in the first round results to compare with the elimination of the prime minister and Socialist party candidate, Lionel Jospin, by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002 (Kuhn 2003). Nonetheless, the first round score of Marine Le Pen was highly significant and exceeded the opinion poll scores that had tended to put her at 15% or less in voting intentions. While her vote share (17.90%) was slightly less than that of the two extreme right-wing candidates in 2002 combined, the number of votes cast for her (just over 6.4 million) far exceeded the totals gained by the extreme right in any previous presidential election. Indeed, between the 2007 and 2012 contests the FN candidate gained over two and a half million votes. Marine Le Pen scored particularly well among employees (22%), skilled tradesmen, small shopkeepers

and company managers (26%) and workers (29%); indeed she was ahead of Hollande (28%), Sarkozy (18%) and all other candidates among this last category. Her electorate also contained a higher proportion of women than that previously obtained by her father and this reduction in the gender gap was one of the main achievements of her electoral performance. In one French department, the Gard in the south, Le Pen even topped the list at the first round with over 25% vote share. Evidence from various qualitative surveys showed that many of her voters were expressing positive support for her views and not simply registering a protest vote. Moreover, the banalisation of extreme right views was evidenced by the significant numerical presence of Le Pen voters among virtually all categories of the French population, with the notable exceptions of the more highly educated and liberal professionals. In the light of her high national score, it was clear that to a significant extent the final result would depend on how Le Pen's voters behaved in the second round and, in particular, on whether Sarkozy could attract them in sufficient numbers to win. Mélenchon's score (11.14%) could be regarded as a mixed bag of a result. On the one hand, it was a huge advance on the scores of Communist party candidates in recent presidential elections and showed the desire of a significant number of left-wing voters to seek to influence Hollande's second round campaign pledges as well as the substance of a possible Hollande presidency. On the other hand, hopes for a higher score had been raised by the huge popular demonstrations of support at the candidate's open-air meetings, while Mélenchon himself had hoped to win the race for third spot against Le Pen in an attempt to show who best represented the marginalised and excluded in French society. Mélenchon was outperformed by Le Pen in every age group including the 18–24 range (9% versus 19%) and also lost out in the socio-professional categories of retired (13% versus 15%), employees (12% versus 22%) and, above all, workers (12% versus 29%). His candidacy was more popular with men than with women.

At his third attempt as a presidential candidate, Bayrou attempted to benefit from any anti-Sarkozy feeling by representing some form of centrist alternative to Sarkozy and Hollande. He failed miserably. His score of 9.10% was well down on his performance in 2007 (18.57%), when he had managed to present himself as a credible alternative to both Sarkozy and Royal. In theory, Sarkozy's right-wing campaign in 2012 ought to have opened up a space in the centre for Bayrou to exploit. However, Sarkozy's core vote remained stubbornly loyal, while Hollande fought a tighter and more professional campaign than Royal had done in 2007, thus preventing any potentially wavering Socialist voters from drifting off towards Bayrou.

All of the other five candidates fell well below the 5% threshold required to secure significant state reimbursement of campaign expenditure.

The Presidential Election: Second Round (6 May)

Since no candidate obtained over 50% of the vote in the first round, the two leading candidates proceeded to the decisive second round run-off. The campaign between the two rounds was dominated by the strategic need of both candidates to maximise their electoral appeal beyond their first round core support. In this regard Hollande started out as clear favourite, since other candidates on the left, most importantly Mélenchon, explicitly called on their voters to vote for the Socialist candidate, while surveys showed that Hollande could also attract a significant section of Bayrou's centrist electorate. In contrast, Sarkozy lacked any significant reservoir of mainstream right votes on which to draw. Instead, he had to try to attract Bayrou's centrist voters and, more importantly, win over a large number of

TABLE 4

Level of turnout in second round of presidential elections
1965–2012 (as percentage of registered electorate)

1965	84.33
1969	68.73
1974	87.33
1981	85.85
1988	84.06
1995	79.66
2002	79.71
2007	83.97
2012	80.35

Sources: *Le Monde*, 24 April 2012; French Constitutional Council (<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

TABLE 5

Presidential election result, 2012: second round

Registered voters	46,066,307	
Abstentions	9,049,998	19.65 (% of registered voters)
Votes	37,016,309	80.35
Spoiled ballots	2,154,956	4.68
Valid votes	34,861,353	75.68
François Hollande	18,000,668	51.64 (% of valid votes)
Nicolas Sarkozy	16,860,685	48.36

Source: French Constitutional Council (<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/>, accessed on 23 June 2012).

TABLE 6

Number of votes and percentage vote share of winning candidates in the second round
(1965–2012)

1965	Charles de Gaulle	13,083,699	55.20
1969	Georges Pompidou	10,688,183	57.59
1974	Valéry Giscard d'Estaing	13,396,203	50.81
1981	François Mitterrand	15,708,262	51.76
1988	François Mitterrand	16,704,279	54.02
1995	Jacques Chirac	15,763,027	52.64
2002	Jacques Chirac	25,537,894	82.21
2007	Nicolas Sarkozy	18,983,138	53.06
2012	François Hollande	18,000,668	51.64

Sources: Duhamel and Jeanneney (2002: 281–4); French Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

those who had voted for Le Pen. Given the electoral arithmetic of the first round, this was always going to be a massive challenge for the incumbent. Bayrou eventually pledged his support for Hollande, probably already calculating that the latter was going to win anyway. Le Pen said that she would personally cast a blank vote in opposition to both remaining candidates. While some Bayrou and many Le Pen voters did in fact vote for Sarkozy in the second

round, he was unable to attract them in sufficient numbers. In particular, a significant proportion of first round Le Pen voters either abstained or cast a blank vote.

The final week of the campaign was dominated by the television debate between the two candidates held on 2 May. The tradition of a televised duel between the two remaining contenders had originated in 1974 and has become a feature of all subsequent presidential elections, with the exception of the 2002 contest when Chirac refused to debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen. Sarkozy entered the debate well behind Hollande in the polls and needed to destabilise him if he were to have any chance of pulling off what now seemed an unlikely victory. The long debate degenerated into a rather ill-tempered affair, as Sarkozy desperately tried to land a knock-out blow, while Hollande was keen not to make any major blunder and to retain his presidential demeanour in the face of the ever more frantic assaults of the incumbent-challenger. Post-debate surveys showed honours to be roughly even, with both sets of supporters arguing that their candidate had won the debate.

At just over 80%, the turnout for the second round of voting was again high (see Table 4). The result was a clear if not overwhelming victory for Hollande with 51.64% of the vote, a narrower margin than opinion polls had predicted for most of the campaign. Although Hollande virtually replicated Mitterrand's victory in 1981 (51.76%), he secured both a lower vote share and almost a million fewer voters than Sarkozy had obtained in 2007 (see Tables 5 and 6).

The Parliamentary Election: First Round (10 June)

French parliamentary elections are contested over two rounds in 566 constituencies situated in metropolitan France and overseas departments, plus 11 new constituencies recently established to allow for the representation of French citizens living abroad. Despite the parity legislation of 2000 to ensure an equal number of male and female candidates (Murray 2010), there was still a significant imbalance between the sexes, with a lower percentage of women candidates in 2012 (40%) than in 2007 (41.6%). The UMP put forward 25.7% women candidates, while the Socialist Party did much better with 45.3%; disappointingly, both major parties were down on their 2007 figures. The other parties, both on the left and extreme right, to a large extent respected the parity legislation, but very few of these parties' women candidates had a realistic chance of winning a seat in parliament.

During the five weeks since Hollande's election, the new president had been a dominant political and media presence. He had chosen not just the new prime minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, but also the other leading ministers. Head of the Socialist party parliamentary group since 1997 and a Hollande supporter in the PS primaries, Ayrault had never previously held ministerial office. Hollande preferred him to Aubry as head of government, with the latter apparently refusing to accept any other ministerial position. Leading Socialist party figures appointed to a ministerial position included former prime minister, Laurent Fabius (minister for foreign affairs), Hollande's campaign director of communication, Manuel Valls (minister of the interior) and his campaign chief, Pierre Moscovici (minister of finance). While parity between the sexes was formally achieved in the new government with women occupying 17 of the 34 posts, only one of the major ministries was allocated to a woman (Christiane Taubira, minister of justice). A member of the small Left Radical party (centre-left), Taubira was also one of two non-PS ministers to be given a senior ministerial portfolio, the other being Cécile Duflot the leader of the EELV, who was appointed as minister of territorial equality and housing. Hollande announced several reform measures, including a small increase to the

national minimum wage, a new law on sexual harassment and the reduction of the retirement age back to 60 for some workers. His main initiative, however, was to try to persuade the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, of the need for a growth package to stimulate economic recovery in the eurozone as the economies of Greece, Spain and Italy came under severe attack from the financial markets.

Following its failure in the presidential contest, the UMP was in a difficult position. The five-year presidential term introduced at the start of the millennium has reduced the importance of the parliamentary elections as a first-order national contest. There was no realistic hope of the electorate reversing its decision of 6 May and reintroducing a period of *cohabitation* between presidential and parliamentary majorities of different political complexions, as had been the case between 1997 and 2002. Moreover, Sarkozy's defeat had left the UMP without a clear leadership figure, while the party was also at risk of fragmentation if the extreme right did well at the polls. After a long campaign for the presidential election, the parliamentary campaign at the national level was a lacklustre affair, with an emphasis on party strategies and 'horse race' coverage rather than substantive policy issues. The main media focus prior to the first round was on some key local constituency contests, notably in Hénin-Beaumont where Mélenchon had decided to stand as the Front de gauche candidate against Marine Le Pen, thus replaying at constituency level the national battle in the presidential election.

The widespread expectation was that, as in 2007, the parliamentary contest would confirm the result of the presidential election of only five weeks previously and deliver a parliamentary majority to the new president. At the national level the main question was whether the Socialist party could gain an overall majority on its own or whether it would need the support of other parties such as the EELV and, more controversially, the Front de gauche. The turnout of 57.22% was the lowest ever for the first round of a parliamentary election in the Fifth Republic, surpassing the previous low of 2007, and was the fourth successive drop in turnout in parliamentary contests since the 1993 election (see Table 7).

The first round result (see Table 8) represented a substantial, if not overwhelming, victory for the Socialist party and its closest associates, whose 34.40% share of the vote was up from 26.67% in 2007. The parties of the mainstream right with the UMP at their core secured a first round vote share of 34.67%, well down on their combined score of over 45% in 2007. Both major parties performed considerably better in the first round of the parliamentary election

TABLE 7
Level of turnout in first round of parliamentary elections
1973–2012 (as percentage of registered electorate)

1973	81.3
1978	83.2
1981	70.9
1986	78.5
1988	65.7
1993	69.2
1997	68.0
2002	64.4
2007	60.5
2012	57.2

Sources: *Le Monde*, 12 June 2012; French Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

TABLE 8
Parliamentary election result, 2012: first round

Electorate	46,082,104		
Votes	26,369,126	57.22 (% of registered voters)	
Abstentions	19,712,978	42.78	
Spoiled ballots	416,267	0.90	
Valid votes	25,952,859	56.32	
Parties	Votes	% of votes cast	Seats
Extreme Left	253,386	0.98	
Front de gauche	1,793,192	6.91	
Socialist	7,618,326	29.35	22
Left Radical	428,898	1.65	1
Other left	881,555	3.40	1
Europe-Écologie-Les Verts	1,418,264	5.46	1
Regionalist	145,809	0.56	
Ecologist	249,068	0.96	
Others	133,752	0.52	
MoDem	458,098	1.77	
Centrist Alliance	156,026	0.60	
Radical Party	321,124	1.24	
Nouveau Centre	569,897	2.20	1
UMP	7,037,268	27.12	9
Other right	910,034	3.51	1
Front National	3,528,663	13.60	
Other extreme right	49,499	0.19	

Source: French Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>, accessed 23 June 2012).

than their respective candidates had done in the first round of the presidential contest. The FN, renamed *Rassemblement bleu marine* for the parliamentary election, and other extreme right candidates gained 13.79% of the vote, the best result for the extreme right in a parliamentary election since 1997 and well up on the disappointing score of 4.70% five years previously. However, it was significantly less than Marine Le Pen's first round score in the presidential election. The highly mediatised and personalised national campaign tends to allow the FN to maximise its electoral appeal in the presidential contest, whereas in the parliamentary election the party is less well implanted as an effective vote winning force in many constituencies. Nonetheless, candidates of the extreme right managed to proceed to the second round in several constituencies, with real hopes of securing some representation in the National Assembly.

The Front de gauche had a disappointing election, scoring 6.91%. While this was well up on the result of the Communist Party in 2007 (4.63%), it was significantly less than Mélenchon's score in the first round of the presidential contest. Mélenchon himself was not just heavily defeated in the highly mediatised contest against Le Pen, but also secured insufficient votes to proceed to the second round. The EELV gained 5.46% of the vote, up from 4.44% in 2007 and a significantly better performance than Eva Joly's first round presidential score (2.31%). The EELV vote share was significantly boosted by their electoral pact with the PS, whereby the Socialists had agreed not to put up its own candidates in 60 constituencies so as to facilitate the election of some EELV deputies. Bayrou's centrist formation MoDem gained a very disappointing 1.77% of the vote, well down on its 2007 score (7.76%). Bayrou himself proceeded to the second round in his constituency in south-west France, but was involved in a three-way fight against a Socialist and UMP candidate which augured badly for his chances of success.

The Parliamentary Election: Second Round (17 June)

Under the rules for parliamentary elections, any candidate securing 12.5% of the registered electorate in the first round is allowed to stand in the second round, thus introducing the possibility of constituency run-offs between more than two candidates. While the majority of second round contests in 2012 were a straight fight between the Socialist party (or in some cases the EELV) on the one hand and the UMP on the other, in some constituencies there was a three-way fight involving an extreme-right candidate as well. Indeed, occasionally the run-off was a straight fight between an extreme right and a Socialist candidate.

With the PS and its allies apparently heading to a clear victory on the basis of the first round of voting, speculation in the week between the two rounds focused on the size of the parliamentary majority for Hollande and the balance of forces within the left. Meanwhile the UMP and other formations of the mainstream right were largely concerned to limit the damage, despite rhetorical claims that defeat was not inevitable. At the national level the UMP controversially refused to give a recommendation to its voters in those seats that were contested between the extreme right and the PS, in stark contrast to the left's explicit support for Chirac in his run-off against Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 presidential election. At the local level, however, in some constituencies the UMP association more or less explicitly supported the FN candidate in such situations, while a former UMP minister, Nadine Morano, publicly affirmed the shared values between her party and that of the extreme right as she attempted in vain to save her parliamentary seat. In contrast, in Hénin-Beaumont the defeated candidate of the mainstream right in the first round explicitly called on his voters to support the Socialist candidate against the front-runner from the first round, Marine Le Pen.

While the stance of the UMP towards the FN was an important news story, it was somewhat overshadowed in the week between the two rounds of voting by the news that Hollande's partner had sent a tweet to the dissident Socialist candidate in La Rochelle supporting him in his head-to-head run-off against the official Socialist party candidate, who just happened to be Hollande's former partner and mother of their four children, Royal. Hollande's previous condemnation of Sarkozy for blurring the dividing lines between private life and public office rebounded against him as officials at the Elysée desperately tried to play down the significance of Trierweiler's intervention. Social and mainstream media had a field day in covering the impact of the tweet, with lively debates on the role of the 'first

TABLE 9

Level of turnout in second round of parliamentary elections
1973–2002 (as percentage of registered electorate)

1973	81.8
1978	84.9
1981	75.1
1986	One round only
1988	69.9
1993	67.6
1997	71.1
2002	60.3
2007	60.0
2012	55.4

Sources: *Le Monde*, 19 June 2012; French Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>, accessed 29 June 2012).

TABLE 10
Parliamentary election result, 2012: second round (votes and seats)

Electorate	43,233,648		
Votes	23,952,486	55.40 (% of registered voters)	
Abstentions	19,281,162	44.60	
Spoiled ballots	923,178	2.14	
Valid votes	23,029,308	53.27	
Parties	Votes	% of votes cast	Seats
Front de gauche	249,498	1.08	10
Socialist	9,420,889	40.91	280
Left Radical	538,331	2.34	12
Other left	709,395	3.08	22
Europe-Écologie-Les Verts	829,036	3.60	17
Regionalist	135,312	0.59	2
Modem	113,196	0.49	2
Centrist Alliance	123,132	0.53	2
Radical Party	311,199	1.35	6
Nouveau Centre	568,319	2.47	12
UMP	8,740,628	37.95	194
Other right	417,940	1.81	15
Front National	842,695	3.66	2
Other extreme right	29,738	0.13	1

Source: French Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>, accessed 29 June 2012).

lady', the political function of Twitter and the difficult position that Hollande now found himself in (Greisalmer 2012).

Once again the turnout of 55.40% was a record low (see Table 9).

The result of the second round is given in Table 10. In terms of the allocation of parliamentary seats, the functioning of the two ballot electoral system is anything but proportional. Instead, it tends to reward those parties who secure a substantial share of the vote nationwide and who can rely on the transfer of voter support from contiguous parties between the two rounds of voting (for example, Front de gauche voters supporting the Socialist party candidate in Hénin-Beaumont). Thus, the Socialists and their immediate allies with just over 34% of the vote in the first round gained a total of 314 seats (54.42% of the total), thereby winning a clear parliamentary majority. The UMP and its centrist allies, also with just over 34% of the vote at the first round, had 229 seats (39.69%). In contrast, the extreme right secured just under 14% of the vote in the first round, but won only 3 seats (0.52%), while the EELV with less than half the vote of the extreme right in the first round (2.95%) won 17 seats as a result of their agreement with the PS. The two-party dominance of the legislature evident after the 2007 parliamentary contest was reaffirmed in 2012 with the Socialist party and the UMP holding more than 82% of the seats between them. Thus, while French party competition is to a significant extent characterised by fragmentation and polarisation at the first round of voting, in terms of parliamentary representation there is a strong tendency towards bipartism (Grunberg and Haegel 2007).

With regard to individual candidacies, the main stories of the parliamentary contest included the victory of all the government ministers who stood for election. Within the ranks of the UMP, Fillon and Copé were re-elected, with the former preferring to abandon his traditional heartland in the Sarthe to stand in a safer seat in Paris (in a constituency that the former UMP minister of justice, Rachida Dati, had also coveted). While Marine Le Pen

TABLE 11

Share of women in the National Assembly (as percentage of total number of deputies)

1981	5.3
1986	5.9
1988	5.7
1993	6.1
1997	10.9
2002	12.2
2007	18.5
2012	26.9

Source: Le Monde, 19 June 2012.

narrowly lost in Hénin-Beaumont, gaining 48.89% vote share and losing by only 118 votes, Jean-Marie Le Pen's granddaughter, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, won in a three-way contest in the Vaucluse in the south of France. Notable defeats included Royal and Bayrou, both of whom had been leading contenders for the presidency in 2007, and Jack Lang, minister of culture during the Mitterrand presidency. Some leading figures from the Sarkozy entourage were also defeated, including Claude Guéant, minister of the interior in the latter part of the Sarkozy presidency, and Frédéric Lefebvre, who lost in one of the constituencies created for French citizens living overseas.

In respect of gender balance, the composition of the new legislature marked a notable advance on that of its predecessor. In 2007 107 female deputies (18.5% of the total) had been elected; in 2012 this figure increased to 155 (26.9%) (see Table 11). The Socialist party had over a hundred female deputies, the EELV with nine female deputies secured parity, while the UMP with only 27 female deputies fell woefully short. The number of ethnic minority deputies increased from one in 2007 to seven in 2012, all of them coming from the left. While this is a symbolic sign of progress in what is supposed to be a colour-blind republic, in proportional terms it is still way out of line with the multi-ethnic composition of French society.

Conclusion

As far as voter turnout is concerned, there is now a clear disparity between the presidential and parliamentary elections. Since the institution of the five-year presidential term in 2002, with the presidential election taking precedence in terms of timing, French voters have clearly decided that this contest is the more important of the two. In the two rounds of the 2012 presidential contest turnout was high by the standards of other Western European democracies, while in the parliamentary election it was low. Research in France shows that while some electoral abstentionism is structural, it is also clear that turnout on the part of many voters is linked to their perception of the stakes involved (Bréchon 2006). The presidential contest mobilised a section of the electorate who regarded the contest as important, but for whom the subsequent parliamentary elections lacked any comparable degree of significance. There were already signs of this trend in 1981 and 1988, when Mitterrand's presidential election victories were followed by the dissolution of right-wing dominated legislatures—turnout in the parliamentary elections a few weeks later was considerably lower in both years, particularly 1988.

Since the twin-track presidential and parliamentary five-year terms have now been embedded in the system, there seems little chance of the parliamentary election going

back to the high turnouts of the early years of the Fifth Republic. Only the untimely death of a president in office—as happened in 1974 when Pompidou died only five years into his seven-year term—or a premature dissolution of the legislature by the president—with the possibility of this backfiring as it did with Chirac’s early dissolution in 1997—can appear to upset the current timetable with its four rounds of voting in the space of two months and the attendant problems of voter fatigue. While in theory it would be possible to hold the two rounds of both elections simultaneously and thus increase turnout for the legislative election, this would mean that voters would not know the result of the presidential contest before casting their vote in the parliamentary election. In turn, this might reintroduce the possibility of the two majorities not coinciding and thus lead to a new period of executive *cohabitation* between a president of one political complexion and a prime minister and parliamentary majority of another. The five-year presidential term was specifically introduced to avoid such a scenario of divided executive power, and French elites would be reluctant to run the potential risk of such a situation reoccurring.

The election results testified to the re-emergence of the Front National as a powerful destabilising entity in French politics. The influence of the extreme right on the political and policy agendas—the so-called *lepénisation* of political attitudes—dates back to the initial breakthrough of the FN as an electoral force in the 1980s. In 2007 it seemed that Sarkozy had succeeded in weakening the electoral appeal of the FN, albeit at the cost of some strongly right-wing policy proposals in areas such as immigration control and crime. In 2012, however, even although Sarkozy’s electoral strategy was even more right wing than in 2007, it failed to prevent some of his supporters of five years previously from returning to their electoral ‘home’ on the extreme right.

Marine Le Pen’s hopes of structurally destabilising the mainstream right to the extent that the UMP would fragment after presidential and parliamentary election defeats and the FN would be in an advantageous position to dominate the whole of the right-wing pole in the party system did not come to fruition in 2012. Moreover, the more the FN widens its electoral appeal, the more the party leader’s competence is evaluated across a range of areas, including economic policy, which was one of the weaknesses of Marine Le Pen during the campaign. While it must be questionable how many mainstream right voters remain to be attracted to the extremist policy proposals of the FN, at the same time the extreme right is in a position to try to influence the values of the UMP and so pull it further towards the right pole of the ideological spectrum.

The UMP and its allies are not just out of power at the national level, they are weak in the different sub-national levels of the political system. The loss of the presidency after 17 years of right-wing occupancy was a particularly cruel blow. Sarkozy’s decision to bow out of political life, at least for the immediate future, gives rise to a contest for control of the party as a launch pad for a presidential candidacy in 2017. In the immediate aftermath of the parliamentary election, Fillon and Copé emerged as the dominant rivals for the party leadership. Aside from the leadership issue, but intimately connected to it, the UMP also needs to reassert its position as a party of the mainstream and renew its policies and electoral appeal so as to win over FN voters without subscribing to extreme-right values.

In contrast, Hollande and the Socialist party can look forward to five years of uninterrupted power, with Hollande dominating the PS in a way that he never managed to achieve as party leader. In reacting to the perceived ‘hyperpresidentialism’ of his predecessor, Hollande initially projected an image of an ‘ordinary President’ (*président normal*) who wished to focus on the major strategic issues and leave much of the day-to-day governing to the prime

minister and government. Yet, while the obsession with hyperactivity that was such a feature of the Sarkozy years may now be out of vogue, no president can now simply concern themselves with a 'reserved domain' of foreign, defence and European policy as de Gaulle did in the 1960s. Voters have long expected their president to be concerned with bread-and-butter economic and social issues, and Hollande will be no exception in this respect: in the context of presidential politics, '*normal*' is not synonymous with 'hands-off'.

It is likely that economic issues will dominate the Hollande presidency: France's endemic unemployment, especially among the young, the uncompetitive nature of many French firms and the need to bring down both the debt and the deficit will be at the top of Hollande's agenda. How the eurozone crisis is resolved will have a significant impact on the president's freedom of manoeuvre; but it is likely that with low levels of economic growth forecast for 2013 and beyond this will be especially narrow. The election campaign did not fully prepare voters for policies of austerity, and indeed the term itself is eschewed by ministers as they urge their compatriots to greater effort. The Hollande presidency, therefore, starts with a paradox: on the one hand, a president with the legitimacy conferred through direct election by a majority of valid votes cast and whose party dominates all levels of the French political system, and on the other hand an economic and currency crisis whose resolution will to a large extent depend on the line taken by Germany. Hollande may seem to have the powers of a 'republican monarch' within France (Duverger 1974), but he knows that French economic performance, and with it his chances of success in the presidential role, depends largely on supranational and global factors over which he may have some influence but very little control.

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