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To cite this article: Raymond Kuhn (2017) The 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 25:4, 353-358, DOI: [10.1080/09639489.2017.1375630](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2017.1375630)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2017.1375630>



Published online: 30 Oct 2017.



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The 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections

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This special issue is devoted to the 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections. Following President François Hollande's decision, announced on 1 December 2016, not to stand for a second term and in the light of a string of heavy electoral defeats for the Socialist Party during his five-year term of office, a change of president, prime minister, government and parliamentary majority could all be safely anticipated at the start of 2017. The expected beneficiary of the electoral cycle was generally considered to be the principal party of the Right, Les Républicains, including their presidential nominee, François Fillon, who in November 2016 had surprisingly won the primary of the Right and Centre against the two longstanding front runners, former President Nicolas Sarkozy and former Prime Minister Alain Juppé. At the turn of the year, therefore, the widespread assumption among political elites and media commentators, supported by opinion poll data, was that the 2017 elections would see a transfer of power from Left to Right, from one set of established political elites to another—in short, a conventional *alternance* as had already happened on several occasions during the Fifth Republic, most recently in 2012 when Hollande and the Socialist-dominated Left had replaced Sarkozy and the Right.

To put it mildly, the reality turned out to be rather different. The involvement of Fillon in the 'Penelopegate' scandal scuppered his chances of acceding to the presidency, although he had already started to slip in opinion polls beforehand as his proposed programme of severe economic cuts came under political and media scrutiny. The selection of Benoît Hamon as the candidate for the Socialist Party, defeating former Prime Minister Manuel Valls in the Socialist primary in January 2017, compounded rather than resolved the problems facing the party towards the end of the Hollande presidency. Hamon had been a longstanding critic of Hollande and pitched his campaign towards the left of the party. This had two consequences: first, it meant that in the presidential campaign Hamon competed for votes with the radical left candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a strategy that was to prove fatal to the former's electoral ambitions; second, it opened up a space for dissident Socialist politicians, this time on the right of the party, to lend their support more or less overtly to the leader of *En marche !*, Emmanuel Macron. Competing against Fillon and Hamon, both of whom represented the extremes of their parties in terms of their electoral positioning, Macron thus found himself occupying an ideal political space to appeal to a broad swathe of voters from the centre-left, centre and centre-right.

In what was only one of the unprecedented aspects of the 2017 electoral cycle, in the first round of the presidential contest the candidates of the two political formations that had dominated Fifth Republic politics over the previous 40 years (the Socialists and the Right)

were both eliminated. So too, albeit only narrowly, was Mélenchon. With Fillon, Hamon and Mélenchon out of the running, the second round became a straight fight between Macron and Marine Le Pen. Although previously an adviser to Hollande at the Élysée and then a government minister, Macron surfed on the electorate's desire for renewal, presenting himself as both an outsider to and a critic of the established political class, including the traditional political parties of the Left and Right. Instead, Macron presented himself as of both left and right as he exploited the notion of a cleavage between 'progressives' and 'conservatives', with the 'progressive' Macronist camp, organised in his new movement *En marche !*, characterised by socially liberal ideas on issues such as gay marriage and a willingness to embrace economic and labour market reform.

Macron clearly placed Marine Le Pen in the camp of 'conservatives'. Whereas in 2002 her father's qualification for the second round had come as a shock—a *coup de tonnerre* in the words of the defeated Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin—in 2017 everyone (the political class, the media, voters) was prepared for the Front national (FN) candidate to be in the second round. Indeed, opinion polls had frequently placed Le Pen in pole position in the first round. Since her election to the leadership of the party in 2011, Marine Le Pen had tried to detoxify the FN brand (*dédiabolisation*) and to broaden the party's electoral appeal, for example to attract more women voters. The party had done well in a series of second-order elections during the Hollande presidency, with Le Pen claiming that it had become the leading party in France. However, the two-round electoral system and cooperation between the parties of the Right and Left prior to the second round meant that dominant electoral scores by the FN in the first round of these contests (at least in some parts of France) were not rewarded with anywhere near proportionate representative success in terms of the number of departmental and regional council seats. While some observers wondered whether the anti-establishment disaffection shown in 2016 by voters in the UK (the Brexit referendum) and the US (the election of Donald Trump as president) might work to Le Pen's advantage in France, in the event the domino theory proved inaccurate. Opinion polls had always shown more French voters opposed to the election of Le Pen than favouring her victory and her defeat in the second round had always seemed the most likely outcome throughout the campaign. Her miserable performance in the face-to-face television debate with Macron between the two rounds confirmed, and even slightly accentuated the margin of, her defeat—but it did not cause it.

Macron's victory in the presidential election was followed by the huge success of his newly renamed party *La République en marche* (LRM) in the subsequent parliamentary contest. *Les Républicains* found themselves once again in opposition; worryingly for their supporters the party was deeply divided on how to respond to Macron's reformist agenda. What was left of the Socialists now formed a small parliamentary group as the party sought to resolve what appeared to be nothing less than an existential crisis. The Front national secured an insufficient number of *députés* to form a parliamentary group, and by late summer questions were being asked within the party about Le Pen's status as leader (but with no alternative contender in sight). Finally, Mélenchon's *La France insoumise* assumed the mantle of the de facto main opposition to LRM in the National Assembly and to government policy, for example on the reform of the labour code, in the streets.

Organisation of the special issue

The special issue comprises six substantive articles, each of which has its own particular content, maintains a specific focus and can be read as a free-standing contribution without reference to the others. At the same time, a reading of the volume as a whole highlights common themes that can be found in at least two (and sometimes more) of the articles: the extent to which the 2017 elections were characterised by change and renewal (Nick Hewlett and Raymond Kuhn); the impact of the emergence of different social fault lines on candidates' campaigns during the elections and on the structure of party competition afterwards (Ben Clift and Sean McDaniel; Gino Raymond); the existential threat facing the two main forces of the Left and Right in the wake of Macron's victory (Ben Clift and Sean McDaniel; David Lees); and policy continuity in key areas such as the economy and employment (Nick Hewlett and Susan Milner). The special issue lays no claim to being comprehensive; several topics, such as candidates' and parties' electoral communication strategies, the role of the media, the campaign of Marine Le Pen and the contribution of the 'minor' presidential candidates, are not the subject of a specific article, even if allusion to these aspects of the elections is made at various points in the volume.

The presidential and parliamentary campaigns

In the introductory article, 'Expect the Unexpected: the 2017 French Presidential and Parliamentary Elections', Raymond Kuhn argues that the 2017 presidential campaign was in many respects very different from all of its predecessors in the Fifth Republic. The same was also true of the parliamentary election. Both were characterised by two complementary features—*le dégagisme* and *le renouvellement*—that together contributed to the sense that in 2017 French politics underwent a radical transformation, including a radical shake-up of the party system and a significant renewal of the political class in both the executive and the legislature. In contrast, in the concluding section on the early weeks of the Macron presidency, the article highlights important elements of continuity with previous presidencies in terms of leadership style and policy initiatives.

In the article entitled 'The Phantom Revolution. The Presidential and Parliamentary Elections of 2017', Nick Hewlett also presents a broad overview of the presidential and parliamentary campaigns, with a strong focus on the programmes of the main presidential candidates. Hewlett argues that one should be wary of the claims regarding a renewal in French politics following the election results. The presidential election may have brought victory for a new president and a supportive parliamentary majority; moreover, the new head of state appointed ministers from both centre-left and centre-right, including the new prime minister from Les Républicains, Édouard Philippe, in his apparent desire to transcend traditional cleavages. However, Hewlett claims that the president's initiatives in respect of political and ideological renewal do not constitute the radical departure described by Macron and his supporters. Instead, his policy agenda, especially in terms of economic reform, has much in common with the general orientation of many governments of both Left and Right over the past few decades. In particular, the author argues, it is highly neo-liberal and pro-business.

In their different ways, therefore, the articles by Kuhn and Hewlett, examine the extent to which the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections mark a break with the

past. The focus and organisation of the two articles are, however, quite different. Hewlett concentrates on Macron's continuity with the neo-liberal economic policies of previous centre-left and centre-right governments. He provides what is essentially a leftist critique of Macron, with the material of the article organised in sections that successively examine the policy programmes and campaign success (or lack thereof) of the five major candidates (Macron, Fillon, Hamon, Le Pen and Mélenchon). In contrast, much of Kuhn's focus is on the twin themes of *renouveau* and *dégagisme* that were such a feature of the two electoral contests, as established political careers bit the dust and traditional parties were cast aside by voters. Selectively using comparator reference points from previous Fifth Republic elections where appropriate, Kuhn analyses the extent of these related phenomena within an overall structure that follows a timeline from Hollande's decision not to stand again, through both sets of primary contests and then the main developments in the presidential and parliamentary elections. It is only in the last section of his article that Kuhn questions the extent of renewal under Macron, not just in terms of economic policy (where he shares some of Hewlett's reservations) but also institutional continuity and leadership style. The two articles, with their different emphases and authorial styles, can thus be read as complementary overviews of the presidential and parliamentary campaigns, results and immediate consequences for French politics.

The Fillon debacle

The article by David Lees, entitled 'A controversial campaign: François Fillon and the decline of the centre-right in the 2017 presidential elections', has a considerably narrower focus. It examines key aspects of Fillon's campaign, with particular reference to his economic and social policies, foreign and European affairs, and the controversy surrounding the corruption allegations that effectively sank his candidacy. Fillon's policy proposals—a mix of strong economic liberalism, social conservatism and a defence of a traditional view of French identity—are closely analysed and evaluated. Lees also covers in detail the controversy that was to dog Fillon throughout his campaign (the so-called 'Penelopegate' scandal), leading to defections in his campaign team when he refused to relinquish his candidacy in the face of judicial investigation. The allegations, first revealed in *Le Canard enchaîné* on 25 January 2017, that Fillon's wife, Penelope and two of his children had been paid from the public purse for fake employment as parliamentary assistants dominated much of the media coverage of the campaign in the following weeks. Yet interestingly Lees argues that Fillon's failure to make it through to the second round of the presidential contest was due only in part to concerns over alleged corruption. It can also be partly explained by his limited appeal beyond his core electorate, with Fillon being effectively squeezed between Marine Le Pen to his right and, more crucially, Macron in the centre.

The Socialist Party and the Left

In their co-authored article entitled 'Is this Crisis of French Socialism Different? Hollande, the Rise of Macron, and the Reconfiguration of the Left in the 2017 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections', Ben Clift and Sean McDaniel argue that with the extraordinary rise of Macron and the near complete collapse of the Socialist Party, recent events have arguably ushered in the most dramatic upheaval in the French party system since 1958, when the Fifth Republic was

established. Their article develops a political economy analysis of the Hollande presidency to help explain the problems faced by the Left in general and the Socialists in particular during the 2017 campaigns. They argue that Hollande's programmatic failures must be situated within an institutional account of the constraints of the presidential logic of the Fifth Republic and tensions between competing factional *courants* within the Socialist Party. In so doing Clift and McDaniel throw new light on this moment of rupture by situating a political economy analysis of Hollande's economic programme within a more intricate institutional analysis of the specificities of the Socialist Party and its position within the Fifth Republic.

Ominously for the future of the Socialist Party, the article contends that after numerous crises of French socialism since 1958, this time is different. Since the 2017 electoral defeats the party has been going through a period of soul searching, even identity crisis; it lacks clear and authoritative leadership, a recovery strategy and a set of policies that will win voters back—it has also lost much of its local implantation and public financial assistance. With the leadership of the Left dominated (provisionally?) by Mélenchon and La France insoumise, the Socialists cannot even rely on disaffected Macron supporters from the centre-left simply returning to the fold. While there are some parallels between the situation of the Socialist Party in 2017 and its organisational predecessor in 1969 following the humiliating defeat of the Socialist candidate Gaston Defferre in that year's presidential contest, there are also clear differences: nobody of François Mitterrand's stature to lead the party, no possibility of an alliance of the broad left, France's membership of the European single market and Eurozone, and the questions raised by an interdependent globalised economy. One particularly interesting issue facing the inheritors of the Socialist Party legacy is whether there exists an ideological and electoral space for a social democratic alternative to the social liberalism of Macron on the one hand and the anti-market statism of Mélenchon on the other.

Macron and the end of the left–right cleavage?

In his article entitled 'Beyond Left and Right?' Gino Raymond argues that the end of the left–right cleavage in French politics is something that has been pronounced with growing regularity over the last 30 years or so. Yet while the claim is not in itself new, Macron's presidential victory and the parliamentary majority obtained by LRM would seem to confirm its increased pertinence. In assessing whether Macron's ideas effectively transcend this traditional cleavage, Raymond analyses, in the first instance, the failure of traditional parties of the Left and Right to adapt to the transformation of their respective electorates over several years and, consequently, the declining appeal of what they had to offer in 2017. To a significant extent the established parties had become ossified and out of touch with social change. Raymond then examines what the implications are when party vehicles for traditional ideologies disappear and the possible risks this entails. Raymond's article, therefore, focuses on the values that political formations represent, the emergence of new social fault lines in France and their political (non-)representation, and the 'hollowing out' of traditional ideological conflicts. In the final section of his article, Raymond considers whether the ideological vacuum has been filled by a politics of spectacle and media management, asking whether France has become a liberal democracy just like any other.

The thorny issue of employment policy: one more heave towards liberalisation?

One of the early policy areas in which President Macron introduced reform was that of employment. Over the summer of 2017 discussions were held between government and social partners (employers and trade unions) on the issue of reforming France's *code du travail* to make employment rules more 'flexible'—a longstanding demand of the employers' organisation, Medef. During the presidential campaign Macron had pledged that the reform would be pushed quickly through parliament via a procedure of legislative ordinance so as to shorten the possible timeframe for opposition. The proposed reform was regarded by critics, notably Mélenchon and the radical left, as a symbolic example of Macron's neo-liberalism. The final article of the special issue, and the only one that has a specific policy focus, concerns this key area of employment policy

In 'Employment policy and labour market during the Hollande presidency: a tragedy in three acts?' Susan Milner provides an analytic and evaluative account of employment policy under President Hollande. In particular, she assesses the extent of continuity and change between 2012 and 2017. Although Hollande's employment policy initiatives may be divided into three broad phases, with a shift towards more liberalising, business-friendly policies over time, Milner argues that the period as a whole shows a high degree of continuity, with liberalising measures already evident from the very start. The policy output may be characterised as a project of what she calls 'bounded flexibility', in which marketisation is contained within certain limits as defined by trade unions' ability to set the agenda of social partner negotiations.

Towards the end of the Hollande presidency, however, Milner contends that the push towards labour law reform, whilst falling short of a wholesale revision of France's protective legislative architecture, ushered in key changes which President Macron intends to take forward and radicalise, leading to a potential 'tipping point' of labour market deregulation. Milner's article helps contextualise the situation facing President Macron in the area of employment policy, providing background analysis to what is at stake in the reform debate of the summer of 2017. It also raises the question of the extent to which Macron's initiatives in this field mark a continuity or a break with the legacy bequeathed by his predecessor at the Élysée, including the controversial 2016 El Khomri law. Finally, in contending that in terms of employment policy the Hollande presidency holds important lessons for our understanding of social democracy across Europe at times of economic crisis and austerity, Milner's article echoes questions raised by Clift and McDaniel concerning the status of the Left in France in the wake of the 2017 elections.