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Voting in the Shadow of the Crisis. The French Presidential and Parliamentary Elections of 2012

Nick Hewlett

The most significant result of the 2012 elections in France was the ejection of Nicolas Sarkozy from the Elysée Palace, in part because of his unpopularity as an individual but also because his policies often seemed to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. The victory of François Hollande in the presidential elections and the Socialists in the parliamentary elections was also historic, because this was the first time since 1995 that there has been both Socialist President and a mainly Socialist government. The Socialist manifesto included promises of economic growth, progressive taxation, capping certain high salaries, job creation and a lower age of retirement. All this put France at odds to some extent with the dominant countries in Europe. Indeed, the economic crisis is crucial to understanding the election campaign and results and almost a third of the electorate voted either to the right or to the left of mainstream parties. The extreme right Front national did particularly well, campaigning on issues of national identity, law and order, and immigration, in particular. Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Front de gauche set out to be the antithesis of Le Pen, and also often appealed to voters disillusioned by mainstream left and who were particularly hard-hit by the crisis. It seemed as if the more traditional working class was beginning to assert itself as a real political actor again.

Le résultat le plus important des élections présidentielles et législatives fut le rejet de Nicolas Sarkozy, conséquence en partie imputable à son caractère controversé mais aussi parce que ses réformes semblaient souvent aider les plus aisés et nuire aux plus démunis. La victoire de François Hollande aux élections présidentielles ainsi que celle des Socialistes aux élections législatives furent aussi historiques, car c'est la première fois, depuis 1995, qu'un Président socialiste dirige le pays avec l'aide d'un gouvernement de gauche. Dans leur manifeste, les Socialistes ont promis de restaurer la croissance économique, d'introduire des impôts plus élevés pour les plus riches, des restrictions sur les salaires élevés dans le secteur public, et d'encourager la création de nouveaux emplois pour les jeunes ainsi que la retraite à 60 ans. Ce programme va à l'encontre de ce que cherchent les autres pays dominants de l'Europe. En effet, il est crucial de prendre

en compte les retombées de la crise économique pour comprendre ces élections et les résultats, en particulier parce qu'un électeur sur trois a voté pour des partis en dehors du centre-droit et centre-gauche. Le Front national a joui d'un très grand succès et ses représentants évoquaient très souvent des questions d'identité nationale, la sécurité et l'immigration. Jean-Luc Mélenchon et le Front de gauche cherchaient à représenter une force aussi anti-Le Pen que possible, mais ils ont attiré aussi—comme le FN—le soutien des électeurs appauvris par la crise. Il semble que la classe ouvrière traditionnelle commence, une nouvelle fois, à faire entendre sa voix sur la scène politique française.

In the French presidential election of April–May 2012, the most unpopular president of the Fifth Republic was unceremoniously dispatched in a poll that had a record high turnout and which became in effect a plebiscite on the figure of Nicolas Sarkozy.¹ Five years of maverick, deeply controversial, autocratic and quasi-bonapartist rule were brought to an end with an entirely clear result. The equally significant if largely consequential result was that the Parti socialiste candidate François Hollande was elected President of the Republic on a programme that put some emphasis on growth rather than exclusively on austerity, on taxing the rich, on curbing the pay of public sector bosses, and creating jobs in both education and the private sector. Not only does France now have the first Socialist President of the Republic in 17 years but, perhaps more importantly, his programme for government puts France at odds with the more extreme economic neo-liberalism of some other members of the European Union in the midst of an economic crisis. The parliamentary elections confirmed these trends, and after the second round of the parliamentary elections in June the PS was very much in the dominant institutional position and the number of pro-Sarkozy, UMP *députés* was drastically reduced and the centre right thus enfeebled.

In this article I argue that beyond the clear judgement made by the French people on the Sarkozy presidency, many of the salient aspects of the election campaigns and the results were determined or were strongly influenced by aspects of the economic crisis. Thus, if the questions of work, unemployment, fair pay, purchasing power, equality and inequality, the ethics of the rich and the lot of the poor were already important in the 2007 campaigns, Sarkozy's rule combined with the economic crisis made them burning issues in 2012. The relatively low level of enthusiasm for the Socialist alternative—let alone the centre right's proposals—seemed to be reflected in the record high level of abstentions in the June parliamentary elections, where fewer than six registered voters in ten turned out to vote. The record number of votes for Marine Le Pen and the Front national was itself in part a reflection of the way in which the crisis was making life more difficult for an ever-growing number of people already in positions of material privation, and how the FN was able to persuade voters that issues regarding both immigrant workers and law and order were intimately related to socio-economic hardship. Moreover, the relative success of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Front de gauche, which is well to the left of the PS, seemed to confirm that there was diminishing confidence in the ability or will of the more mainstream parties to bring

relief to those in lower income brackets and especially the unemployed. The virtual collapse of François Bayrou's self-defined centre-oriented MoDem party seemed to indicate that there was little enthusiasm for candidates who made a virtue out of being moderate.

When analysing the detail of the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2012, then, it is important to bear in mind the juncture at which we stand. There is general consensus that the economic troubles of the Western world run very deep and it is now almost a truism to state that, at least for the time being, capitalism itself is in crisis. These troubles first manifested themselves as banking crises and in some countries additionally as a collapse in the value of property, but in most economies of Europe and North America, these are certainly problems which are both deeply structural and which are having a highly detrimental effect on the lives of millions of less well-off working people—as well as the unemployed, of course. Many agree that the roots of the problems lie in part with the shift away from manufacturing and towards the service sector, and over-emphasis on the financial sector. There is also broad agreement that the rise of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) economies is part of a process of slow and uneven decline for some high-performing economies. The increasingly globally interconnected nature of the world economy, a process which allowed for years of relative prosperity in certain geographical areas, is at least in part to blame, then. There is, on the other hand, no understanding or even proper hypothesis on the part of either economists or politicians regarding how long the crisis might last and this, amongst other things, meant there was a general impression during the 2012 French election campaigns that neither economists nor politicians were properly in control. Close to home, the international economic threats loomed in the form of a possible break-up of the Eurozone, and suggestions by some politicians and economists that France's economy could go the same way as that of Greece and Spain, with all the attendant social consequences. In many respects, then, the fundamental workings of the capitalist economy were not only laid bare during the election campaigns, but the relationship between the economy and politics was to the fore, and more obviously than at any other time since François Mitterrand and the Socialists came to power in 1981.

In what follows, I begin by examining the fortunes of Sarkozy and the UMP. I then explore the PS campaign and victory and its significance, particularly given that there was an element of growth strategy contained in the Hollande manifesto. Next, I look at the unprecedented success of the FN in terms of both presidential and parliamentary results, which saw the party re-enter the *Assemblée nationale* for the first time since 1988, with two *députés*. I argue that it is the strength of the FN, plus the relative success of Mélenchon's *Front de gauche*, that are the key to understanding these elections. The two parties are, of course, at opposite ends of the political spectrum and are sworn enemies, but the international economic crisis has led to enhanced appeal for politics which reflects the profound concerns of electors and activists and offers radical solutions.

Sarkozy and the UMP

As with so many other autocratic and in particular bonapartist, populist-authoritarian rulers, the rejection, when it came, was decisive. Sarkozy was despised by many for certain personal or quasi-personal aspects of his rule, including his rudeness, his irascibility, his penchant for flagrant displays of personal wealth, his 140% pay rise on coming to office and his pursuit of friendships with the richest and most powerful business people and media tycoons. He threw insults at numerous groups of people and most infamous was the ‘casse-toi, pauvre con’ remark at an agricultural show in February 2008; the celebration of his victory in May 2007 at Fouquet’s restaurant in Paris had a guest list composed almost entirely of the very rich and powerful; the holiday on his billionaire friend Bolloré’s yacht seemed to confirm his desire to cultivate friends who were part of the business elite; and his readiness to resort to nepotism appeared to manifest itself when his son Jean very nearly became head of the state-run organisation that oversees the *La Défense* business area on the outskirts of Paris. But Sarkozy was also rejected for his policies and in particular the ways in which they had often either made life more difficult for people at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum or made the wealthy even more comfortable, including raising the age of retirement and the *bouclier fiscal*, which introduced an upper limit on taxation of 50%. Indeed, Sarkozy made the question of work and rewards for work a priority, and passed laws which seemed to many to favour the rich and disadvantage the poor. In other areas, his harsh treatment of Roma, the abject failure of the so-called Marshal Plan in the *banlieues* and the heavy-handed law and order measures became yet more symbols of a presidency that deeply divided France and was widely loathed (Hewlett 2011). Although Sarkozy managed to receive a respectable 27.18% of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections and 48.36% in the second, the right-wing *Le Figaro*’s view that he had bravely faced the economic crisis and had ‘engagé des réformes capitales concernant l’université, la recherche, la justice, les retraites, la réduction des dépenses publiques, [et] l’extension des droits des citoyens’ (Mougeotte 2012) turned out to be a minority view and for the first time in the Fifth Republic, the incumbent was beaten by the challenger in the first round and lost by a clear margin in the second (see full results in Tables 1 and 2).

Certainly, the economic crisis and the way in which many governments had imposed austerity as a way of attempting to combat it had meant that any incumbent was unlikely to win, and in the eighteen months preceding the French elections of 2012, nine out of 17 Eurozone countries had imposed defeat on their governments, including Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Slovakia, Slovenia and of course Greece. But it did seem just possible that Sarkozy’s idiosyncratic approach could attract the right number of voters at the last minute. In addition to his voluntaristic determination and campaigning brio, his and his team’s approach was (as in 2007) to comfort the conservative electorate with traditional conservative policies and court the working class voters with populist promises. Thus, in 2012 Sarkozy certainly played to the conservative electorate with promises to end the 35-hour week,

Table 1 The French Presidential elections of 22 April and 6 May 2012.

First round, 22 nd April 2012 (in order of result)	First round 2007
François Hollande Parti Socialiste 28.63%. 10,272,705 votes	Ségolène Royal Parti Socialiste 25.87%. 9,501,295 votes
Nicolas Sarkozy Union pour un Mouvement Populaire 27.18%. 9,753,629 votes	Nicolas Sarkozy Union pour un Mouvement Populaire 31.18%. 11,450,302 votes
Marine Le Pen Front National 17.90%. 6,421,426 votes	Jean-Marie Le Pen Front National 10.44%. 3,835,029 votes
Jean-Luc Mélenchon Front de gauche 11.10%. 3,984,822 votes	Marie-George Buffet Parti Communiste 1.93%. 707,327 votes
François Bayrou Mouvement Démocrate 9.13%. 3,275,122 votes	François Bayrou Union pour la Démocratie Française 18.57%. 6,820,914 votes
Eva Joly Europe Ecologie les Verts 2.31%. 828,345 votes	Dominique Voynet Les Verts 1.57%. 576,758 votes
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan Debout la République 1.79%. 643,907 votes	Philippe De Villiers Mouvement Pour la France 2.23%. 818,704 votes
Philippe Poutou Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste 1.15%. 411,160 votes	Olivier Besancenot Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire 4.08%. 1,498,835 votes
Nathalie Arthaud Lutte Ouvrière 0.56%. 202,548 votes	Arlette Laguiller Lutte Ouvrière 1.33%. 488,119 votes
Jacques Cheminade Solidarité et Progrès 0.25%. 89,545 votes	Frédéric Nihous, Chasse Pêche Nature et Tradition, 1.15%. 420,775 votes José Bové, Confédération Paysanne 1.32%, 483,076 votes Gérard Schivardi, Parti des Travailleurs 0.34%, 123,711 votes
Registered electors 46,028,542 Abstentions 9,444,143 (20.52%) Number voting 36,584,399 (79.48%) Blank and spoiled papers 701,190 (1.52%) Votes cast 35,883,209 (77.96%)	
Second round, 6 th May, 2012	Second round 2007
F. Hollande, 51.63%, 18,004,656 votes	Ségolène Royal, 46.94%, 16,790,440 votes
N. Sarkozy, 48.37%, 16,865,340 votes	Nicolas Sarkozy, 53.06%, 18,983,138 votes
Registered electors: 46,066,499 Abstentions: 9,050,095 (19.65%) Number voting: 37,016,404 (80.35%) Blank and spoiled papers: 2,146,408 (4.66%) Votes cast: 34,869,996 (75.69%)	

Source: <http://www.lemonde.fr/resultats-election-presidentielle/>.

Table 2 The French parliamentary elections of 10 and 17 June 2012.

First round results, 10 th June 2012 (in order of score)	Second round, 17 th June 2012, seats won (out of 577 total)
PS (Parti socialiste) 29.22%, 7,582,157 votes	278
UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire) 26.51%, 6,880,958 votes	188
Far right 13.77%, 3,573,767 votes	3
Front de gauche 6.95%, 1,802,324 votes	10
Ecologists 6.27%, 1,628,264 votes	18
Various right 4.19%, 1,086,149 votes	18
Various left 3.55%, 920,680 votes	24
Nouveau centre 2.7%, 700,796 votes	14
MoDem 1.74%, 451,849 votes	2
Parti radical de gauche 1.67%, 434,239 votes	13
PRV (Parti radical) 1.29%, 333,540 votes	9
Various 1.17%, 303,601 votes	
Far left 0.98%, 254 535 votes	
Registered voters: 46, 082,104	Registered voters: 43,233,648
Abstentions: 19,712,978 (42.78%)	Abstentions: 19,281,162 (44.6%)
Number voting: 26,369,126 (57.22%)	Number voting: 23,952,486 (55.4%)
Blank and spoiled papers: 416,267 (1.58%)	Blank and spoiled papers: 923,178 (3.85%)
Votes cast: 25,952,859 (98.42%)	Votes cast: 23,029,308 (96.15%)

Source: <http://www.lemonde.fr/resultats-elections-legislatives/>.

reduce social charges for employers, oblige the unemployed to either retrain or lose benefit and encourage teachers to work longer hours in return for higher pay. He attempted to win back more left-leaning floating voters—many of whom had indeed supported him in 2007—with promises to introduce substantial levies on tax exiles, to cap bankers' bonuses and to introduce a tax on financial transactions. He also insisted he would attack elitism where necessary, in part via frequent referenda, explaining that '[c]haque fois qu'il y aura un blocage, je ferai trancher le peuple français' (Nunès 2012), and giving as an example the proposal to oblige the unemployed to undergo retraining.

The most important factor regarding the tone of the campaign was that the Sarkozy camp knew they needed to attract voters away from the FN if he was to win, and in

2012 he waged an even more right-wing campaign than in 2007. Influenced in particular by his key advisor and former extreme right activist, Patrick Buisson, he said, for example, that he would cut legal immigration by half, make it harder for immigrants to receive benefits and further restrict the ability of families of immigrant workers to join them in France. France would also consider withdrawing from the Schengen Agreement which allowed people to travel without restrictions between member countries. In speech after speech Sarkozy played to the extreme right electorate, with frequent suggestions that there were strong links between immigration and the breakdown of law and order, and he made explicit connections between socio-economic hardship and immigration. For example, he declared at a large meeting at the *Salle de la Mutualité* in Paris:

Il y a des inquiétudes, des souffrances, des angoisses face à ce nouveau monde en train de se dessiner. Ces angoisses, ces souffrances, je les connais, je les comprends. Elles portent sur la frontière, sur les délocalisations, sur l'immigration, la valorisation du travail et la sécurité. (Lepartementier and Schneider 2012)

Even more explicitly, and with an element of now-characteristic Sarkozy-esque farce, he assured voters he knew that '[l]e premier sujet de préoccupation de discussion des Français—je parle sous votre contrôle—c'est cette question de la viande halal' (Lemarié 2012). Between the two rounds of the presidential election, the right to vote for immigrants in local elections as proposed by Hollande became a particular target in speeches, posters and leaflets, as did questions of law and order, reminding voters that Hollande was—in the eyes of the UMP and Sarkozy—soft on immigration and soft on immigrants. When Mohamed Merah killed seven people in Toulouse and Montauban in March 2012 in an attempt to promote the cause of Islam, Sarkozy pledged to clamp down further on communities which might generate terrorists of this type. Merah's father intended at one point to take out a lawsuit against France for having killed his son, which seemed to strengthen the President's case.

Sarkozy and the UMP thus attempted to combine appeal to traditional conservative voters with a more populist appeal to ordinary working people, in particular (although not only) those who tended to vote FN. In the former they succeeded well and traditional conservative voters supported Sarkozy and the UMP in large numbers (Lepartementier and Schneider 2012). However, many voters who were inclined towards the FN were sufficiently disillusioned with Sarkozy to vote FN instead, so, by contrast to the situation in 2007, his attempt to poach votes in this territory was a failure. Crucially, after the strong results for the FN in the first round of the presidential election put her party in a powerful position in terms of influencing the outcome of the second, Marine Le Pen declared publicly that she would spoil her ballot in the second round, although she gave no formal voting advice to her followers. This was enough, however, to persuade many first-round FN voters not to vote Sarkozy in the second, and for Sarkozy to be defeated.

In 2007 Sarkozy had declared that he wanted a 'droite sans complexes', an unapologetically right-wing UMP that broke with the recent history of the French right

which, under Chirac in particular, had made too many concessions to the values of the left, had given in to street protest, and worst of all, had sometimes done nothing at all. In both 2007 and 2012 Sarkozy and the UMP had sought to promote more traditional values of the right in the form of authority and discipline, the right to manage and the right to expect people to make sacrifices in work which would, however, be well remunerated. In 2007, this was an ideological gamble that had paid off, combined with the steely determination of an apparently exceptional leader. But after five years of a presidency which had shown that he was personally unsuited in many ways, and under which unemployment had risen and the poor had often become poorer, the gamble did not pay off a second time. By pursuing a strategy of unapologetically right-wing politics which strayed into the extreme right's territory, the centre right had itself crossed a moral line in the sand and had succeeded in boosting the popularity of the FN; many FN voters were themselves deeply disillusioned with Sarkozy, but at the same time viewed the FN as more acceptable and mainstream than it used to be. Promoting the notions of work and—implicitly—class, Sarkozy and the UMP had at the same time, with a backdrop of economic crisis, high unemployment and increasing impoverishment, helped reintroduce clear divisions between right and left, which the PS managed to benefit from.

As suggested above, the presidential elections became in effect a two-round plebiscite about Sarkozy himself, which in part explains the very high turnout, at roughly 80% in both rounds. Certainly, there has been a tendency over recent years for the presidential elections to become particularly important, especially as constitutional changes have strengthened the role of the president, but the particularly high-profile and deeply controversial way in which Sarkozy interpreted his brief made this election particularly personal. The parliamentary elections were also dominated by the figure of Sarkozy, who was so personally associated with governmental measures taken over the previous five years, when ministers, including the prime minister (not to mention *députés* in the *Assemblée nationale*) seemed to count so little in the decision-making process. After the parliamentary elections the centre right had only 196 members in the *Assemblée nationale*, compared with the PS and allies' 295, although it was not the crushing defeat the UMP might have feared.

Hollande and the Parti socialiste

I have argued above that the result of the presidential elections, and to some extent the parliamentary elections as well, should be interpreted primarily as a rejection of Sarkozy. Hollande's victory is nonetheless historic, as he is only the second Socialist to be elected President of the Republic since the birth of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The first and truly momentous presidential victory for the Socialists came in 1981, with the election of François Mitterrand as President, who brought far-reaching and decidedly left-social-democratic change, which included widespread nationalisations, job creation, labour law reform, decentralisation and regularisation of the status of illegal immigrants. Mitterrand was president for two seven-year terms, although after a sharp economic policy u-turn in

1982–3 the era was largely characterised by pragmatic rule and little further significant reform, and it was punctuated by two periods of cohabitation between President Mitterrand and right-wing governments (in 1986–8 and 1993–5) (e.g. Colombani and Portelli 1995). Since then, there has been no left-leaning President, but Socialist Lionel Jospin was Prime Minister for five years, presiding over a largely Socialist government after the decision by President Chirac to dissolve parliament in 1997 resulted in a win for the left. Perhaps the lowest point in the Socialists' history of presidential campaigning came in 2002, when the PS candidate Jospin was beaten in the first round of the presidential elections by FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, who went on to face Jacques Chirac in the second round (and was soundly beaten).

Neither the Hollande manifesto nor the PS programme for the 2012 parliamentary elections had anything like the breadth or the depth of Mitterrand's 1981 reforms. But there were certainly nods in the direction of progressive social change and an emphasis on state-stimulated growth rather than exclusively austerity to tackle the economic crisis. In a direct challenge to practice during the Sarkozy years, progressive tax reform became the show piece of the Socialist manifesto, in particular the promise of a 75% tax on incomes over one million Euros per year and a minimum 45% on those over €150,000. Tax breaks for wealthy individuals would be capped at €10,000 and there would be a substantial rise in capital gains tax. Bigger companies, meanwhile, would pay more tax than smaller ones. (Parti Socialiste 2012). Moreover, directors of public companies would draw salaries of no more than 20 times the average wage, and there would be 150,000 *génération* contracts to encourage companies to take on younger people on a permanent basis. The age of retirement will be brought back down to 60 for those who have 41.5 years of pensionable employment. The Socialists promised that revenue generated from these measures would be used to generate growth as well as to cut the deficit from above 5% of GDP to below 3%. On Europe, they planned to re-negotiate the fiscal pact which becomes operational in January 2013 and which commits signatories (including France) to having national budgets that break even or are in surplus. Other Socialist measures included cutting the share of nuclear power in French energy from 75% to 50% by 2025 in what Hollande described as a 'transition écologique'. Education was another major priority and beyond the promised 60,000 new teaching posts, there were plans to have shorter school days, teach Wednesday afternoons for the first time, shorten school holidays and reform teacher training. Again, many of the policies on education flew in the face of the UMP's approaches and practice, and whose manifesto suggested more autonomy for schools and higher pay for teachers who taught 26 instead of 18 h per week.

These measures would not, even if they were all fully implemented, profoundly change the nature of French society and the economy. They amounted to a careful balancing act designed to appeal both to habitually-left voters as well as those hardest hit by the crisis (and by measures taken during Sarkozy's presidency) but who might waiver politically, without, however, unduly frightening the business class; this was a balancing act which led Hollande himself during the campaign to describe his likely victory as potentially 'poisoned' (Dupin 2012). Indeed, it was also clear that many

changes introduced under Sarkozy, including some highly contentious ones, would not be reversed. These included: the ban on wearing the burqa in public; many new measures on law and order; controversial reforms in the system of justice; substantial changes to the constitution; the guarantee of minimum transport services during industrial action; and participation in the integrated command structure of NATO. There is a commitment to discontinue the practice under Sarkozy of replacing only one civil servant in two as they retire, but there appears to be no plan to replace the net loss of 100,000 civil servants which this policy enabled. Some services that were suspended in the health service will be reinstated, however. On immigration, although the Socialists have a commitment to allow immigrants to vote in local elections, a progressive stance which has been talked about since the 1980s but never implemented, there will also be an annual debate in parliament to decide how many immigrant workers France needs.

Thus the Hollande and PS programmes had nothing like the sweep and the depth of the 1981 Mitterrand programme. But there were certain nods in this direction, and plans to tax the rich in particular demonstrated recognition that there was much anger at the way in which wealth was concentrated and how poorer individuals and families were often at a loss to understand how they could improve their prospects. The message to the electorate was clear in this respect, although the Socialists were also keen not to frighten either national or international capital unduly. Certainly, soon after the new Socialist government had been formed, there were reports that wealthy individuals were preparing to relocate abroad (especially to London) in order to avoid the 75% tax on salaries over one million Euros per year (e.g. *Le Figaro* 23 July 2012), but the financial markets reacted with indifference in the immediate aftermath of the elections, by stark contrast with their response to Mitterrand's victory in 1981, when the Paris Bourse went into free-fall and trading had to be suspended.

Time will tell how much Hollande and the PS are prepared to avoid the austerity-oriented road many other European governments are following, although significant compromise seemed likely in the medium to long run. In terms of rhetoric, tone and gesture, however, Hollande was certainly pitching to the left. For example, in January 2012, in a speech in Le Bourget, he went as far as saying:

Mais avant d'évoquer mon projet, je vais vous confier une chose. Dans cette bataille qui s'engage, je vais vous dire qui est mon adversaire, mon véritable adversaire. Il n'a pas de nom, pas de visage, pas de parti, il ne présentera jamais sa candidature, il ne sera donc pas élu, et pourtant il gouverne. Cet adversaire, c'est le monde de la finance. Sous nos yeux, en vingt ans, la finance a pris le contrôle de l'économie, de la société et même de nos vies. (Hollande 2012a)

In his first speech after election Hollande promised a 'new path' for Europe, but insisted that measures to stimulate growth should be accompanied by cuts in order to reduce public debt. He reminded those listening that both France and Europe as a whole had huge debts, weak growth, high unemployment, and reduced competitiveness; Europe as a whole was struggling to come out of crisis. But he was equally keen to

draw a clear line under the Sarkozy era and promised a radically new philosophy: 'Et quand, au terme de mon mandat, je regarderai à mon tour ce que j'aurai fait pour mon pays, je ne me poserai que ces seules questions: ai-je fait avancer la cause de l'égalité? Est-ce que j'ai permis à la nouvelle génération de prendre toute sa place au sein de la République?' (Hollande 2012b). The new president also made various important symbolic gestures, including laying a wreath at Jules Ferry's tomb, apparently indicating a profound commitment to free and universal education. He also laid a wreath at Marie Curie's tomb, a gesture which was interpreted not only as symbolising a celebration of France's past achievements but also acceptance of foreigners on French soil.

The appointment of Jean-Marc Ayrault as Prime Minister was also significant in terms of sending a new message; the son of a factory worker and Mayor of Nantes since 1989, Ayrault seemed to stand both for constancy and being in touch with ordinary people. The first Socialist cabinet was made up of 34 ministers, divided equally between men and women, amongst whom there was a Minister for Women's Rights for the first time for many years; this minister, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, was a 34-year-old local councillor of Moroccan extraction and she was also named government spokeswoman. The cabinet was mainly made up of PS members, including former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius as Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the only significant non-Socialist member of the cabinet was the Green party leader Cécile Duflot, who became Minister for Housing. The first cabinet meeting cut ministerial salaries by 30%, but it was not long before Prime Minister Ayrault also instructed ministers that they would all have to reduce expenditure by 15% over three years and pare back the number of employees by 2.5% per year. The first measures decided upon by the new government included re-implementing a retirement age of 60 for those who started work at 18, raising the minimum wage by just above the rate of inflation and limiting housing rental increases in certain areas, including Paris. It was also clear that Hollande and the new government were keen to negotiate and make compromises with trade unions and other pressure groups, and discussions began in mid-July with the major trade union confederations and employers' organisations over various issues, albeit in the broadest terms at first, including discussion of training, pay, equality between men and women and pensions (Chastand and Jérôme 2012). One of the dangers for any left-of-centre government in France is that they will become caught between what they wish to implement on the one hand, and the actions of trades unionists on the other, and this seemed a particular danger given that there was clearly significant support for views to the left of the PS. Indeed, with various job losses in the private sector announced in the summer of 2012, including many thousands at Peugeot-Citroën, it seemed that industrial relations conflicts would not take long to emerge. Early negotiations were indeed designed to avoid the situation where there was a 'troisième tour social'.

To conclude for the moment regarding the significance of these elections in relation to Hollande and the PS, although neither presidential nor parliamentary election results could be described as a landslide for the Socialists, their institutional dominance

should not be underestimated. The PS now has an absolute majority in the *Assemblée nationale*, it has control of the Senate (since September 2011) for the first time since 1958, most regional councils have a left majority, most cities (with the exceptions of Marseille, Nice and Le Havre) have mayors on the left, and the left did very well in the cantonal elections of 2010. Perhaps more importantly, alongside the election results in Greece and local elections in important areas in Germany, the PS victory has modified the European political landscape by reasserting the importance of economic growth, or at least suggesting there is another way. Indeed, Europe will be particularly important for Hollande, whose plan for growth includes using European finance to start or speed up the implementation of large structural projects, notably in the domains of the environment and energy.

Marine Le Pen and the Front national

The tectonic shifts in the international economy, five years of maverick, autocratic rule, combined with the traditional willingness of French voters and activists to challenge the mainstream, meant that almost one third of voters cast their votes in favour of parties either to the right or to the left of the more centre-oriented parties in the first round of the presidential elections, and over one fifth in the first round of the parliamentary elections. Beyond what might be termed a predilection to revolt on the part of a significant minority of the French, this was a strong indication that the centre parties are perceived by many as providing an inadequate response to the economic crisis and its effects on ordinary people. Thus, the Front national emerged from the elections of 2012 very much as the third party, after the PS and the UMP. In the presidential elections Marine Le Pen received 18.03% of the vote (compared with 10.44% for her father in 2007) and in the parliamentary elections the FN received 13.77% overall (compared with 4.29% in 2007). This meant that in the presidential elections 6.2 million people voted FN and in the parliamentary elections 3.5 million did so. Le Pen did not, of course, succeed in coming second in the presidentials, as her father had done in 2002, but she received 896,000 more votes than he did that year.

Marine Le Pen and the FN waged a campaign around the three themes of national identity, law and order and immigration, and purchasing power was also a common theme. Thus, measures proposed included reducing social insurance taxes, a new wealth tax on fortunes of over €790,000, the creation of a new 'social import tax', replacing the European Common Agricultural Policy, re-industrialising former industrial areas and providing more support for small and medium-sized businesses. If Le Pen had won, she would have held a referendum on withdrawal from the Eurozone and given states more sovereignty and, in particular, control over national borders. France would also have left the Schengen zone and withdrawn from NATO. The number of legal immigrants would have been cut by 95% over five years; those remaining would have had reduced access to benefits; families of immigrants would have been barred in all circumstances, and no illegal immigrants would have been regularised. On education, there were promises to 're-establish discipline' in schools, emphasise a traditional view of history,

introduce police presence in schools, and impose fines for recalcitrant children (*Le Monde* 19 April 2012).

Le Pen had spent several years working to improve the image of the FN, attempting to shed some of the thuggish reputation it had had under her father, with the intention of attracting voters away from the UMP in particular; the process became known as *dédiabolisation*. In addition to the UMP's move to the right under Sarkozy, this contributed to blurring the boundaries between the centre right and the extreme right, especially amongst the Droite populaire UMP candidates in the southeast. Moreover, some UMP candidates in the parliamentary elections were tempted to negotiate with the FN over withdrawing in favour of the best-placed candidate. The FN's overt racism and insistence that immigration was to blame for many of France's ills became an important ingredient in appealing to some of those who felt deeply marginalised as a result of economic hardship. In this sense there were shades of the 1930s both to the election campaigns and the results, as the extreme right emerged even stronger than before and the more mainstream right appeared to be prepared to capitulate to forces to its right.

Thus the FN succeeded in appealing to the suffering, frustrations and fears of many poorer French people who felt ignored by mainstream politicians and in danger of finding themselves on the very margins of society. Some 29% of the blue-collar electorate (that is, 29% of those blue-collar workers who went to the polls) voted Le Pen, which was one percentage point higher than for Hollande (Lepartmentier and Schneider 2012). Even more importantly, for the first time the FN managed to make significant gains in rural France and in the suburbs of large towns and cities, picking up many votes in increasingly deprived areas described by Christophe Guilluy as *rurbain* (Guilluy 2010). In the presidential elections Le Pen was particularly strong in areas where the FN is usually popular, including the Meuse, l'Oise, the Somme, the northeast 'crescent', the Gard, the Var, Alpes-Maritimes and Bouches-du-Rhône (she came first in Marignane, in the Bouches-du-Rhône). In Hénin-Beaumont (Pas-de-Calais), which is the constituency where Le Pen was a candidate in the parliamentary elections, she also came first with 35% of the vote and received 25% in the department as a whole. More surprisingly, Le Pen made breakthroughs in places like Côtes-d'Armor, Finistère, Calvados, the two Corsican departments and the Aude. In all, Le Pen obtained over 20% in 11 out of 22 metropolitan regions and obtained the best result in the Vaucluse, with 27.03%, and the worst in Paris, with 6.20%. Le Pen is better represented across the socio-economic and age categories—including young people—than the FN ever has been before and, as one FN leader commented, what worked was a campaign oriented towards rural areas and the greater suburbs—in other words, 'la France pauvre' (Lepartmentier and Schneider 2012).

In the parliamentary elections, the FN did less well, in part because the figure of Le Pen herself was so important and this meant a higher vote in an election where individuals counted more. However, Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen won in Carpentras, in the Vaucluse, and another FN candidate, Gilbert Collard, won in Vauvert, in the Gard, meaning that the FN entered the Assemblée nationale again for

the first time since 1988 with two *députés*. But this was a relatively disappointing result for the FN, given the overall support for the party.

Mélenchon and the Front de gauche

Jean-Luc Mélenchon is of course at the other end of the spectrum from Marine Le Pen, but there was a substantial overlap in their target voters, in particular those who felt ignored by the mainstream and left high and dry by the worsening economic climate. Indeed, his party, the Front de gauche, was set up in many ways as a mirror image of the FN, to the extent that it sought to take on politicians of the centre and defend the interests of those who were socially and economically disadvantaged, but by stark contrast with Le Pen he put support for immigrants at the very heart of his programme. The name of the party was itself intended as a direct challenge to the way in which the Front national appeared to be appealing to working-class voters, and the Mélenchon manifesto was entitled *L'Humain d'abord* as a rebuttal of an earlier FN slogan, 'Les Français d'abord'. Perhaps most importantly it argued that all immigrants should have the right to naturalisation after living in France for five years, and was for the regularisation of the status of illegal immigrants. As a sworn enemy of the FN and would-be nemesis of its leader, Mélenchon debated Le Pen on national television and described her as 'semi-démente', whilst she accused him of being part of the mainstream political system.

A former member of the PS, Minister for Vocational Education from 2000 to 2002 and an MEP since 2009, Mélenchon was one of the leaders from within the PS of the No campaign in the 2005 referendum on a European Union constitution, a campaign which won the day and which came to symbolise a spirit of resistance on the left. His party is a coalition of the formerly-powerful Parti communiste français (which from 1945 to 1978 received roughly 20% of the national vote), former PS members and independents. With 11.14% of the vote, representing 3.9 million votes, Mélenchon came fourth in the first round of the presidential elections and the Front de gauche received 6.94% in the first round of the parliamentary elections.

Doggedly against economic liberalism, Mélenchon believed that the more centre-oriented parties did little to combat Le Pen and the Front national. He, on the other hand, argued that problems in the impoverished suburbs would only be resolved if the real causes were addressed, including the distribution of wealth in society and valuing all human beings equally. The Mélenchon manifesto pledges included a 100% tax on any earnings over €360,000, full pensions from the age of 60 for those who have worked 41 years, a 20% increase in the minimum wage, severe limits to salaries at the upper end of the spectrum, the nationalisation of large energy companies, a time limit on short-term contracts, the regularisation of the status of illegal immigrants, and scrapping the European stability pact. He was very much against what he saw as the neo-imperial actions of the USA in particular, and would take France out of NATO. Resistance and revolt were certainly at the heart of the Mélenchon rhetoric and he was the clearest left response to the economic crisis, drawing huge crowds at rallies in

Lille, Toulouse, Marseille and Paris, and in early spring he was well ahead of Le Pen in the polls. Decidedly fiery in form, he argued that '[l]'insurrection citoyenne est un devoir sacré de la République' and declared in his manifesto that the real goal was emancipation of the human race, 'en créant les conditions pour que chacune et chacun puisse construire sa vie libérée de toute domination et développer ses potentialités' (Mélenchon 2011, 77).

The level of support for Mélenchon in the presidential election was in the end surprisingly low, in part no doubt because people were fearful that Hollande would not go through to the second round if they voted further to the left in the first, which is what happened with Jospin in 2002 when roughly 10% voted for the far left in the first round of the presidential elections; thus the inherent 'bi-polar logic' of the Fifth Republic was for the left-leaning electorate reinforced by a traumatic experience ten years previously. Nevertheless, it was the first time a candidate to the left of the PS had received more than 10% since 1981, when Georges Marchais for the PCF polled 15.35%. In the presidential elections of 2007, the PCF candidate Marie-Georges Buffet received only 1.93%. In the traditional left-wing stronghold Seine-Saint-Denis, northeast of Paris, Mélenchon received his best score of 16.99%, second only to Hollande. Mélenchon called for a Hollande vote in the second round, making it clear, however, that the Front de gauche had no interest in ministerial posts.

In the parliamentary elections, Mélenchon stood in a three-way contest which included Le Pen in the former mining town of Hénin-Beaumont in the Pas-de-Calais, but he came third after the PS candidate narrowly beat Le Pen to first place. The Front de gauche emerged from the parliamentary elections with ten *députés*, whereas it had 19 beforehand, a reduction explained in part by a disappointing result in the parliamentary elections and also because there was no agreement between rounds with the PS to withdraw in favour of the better-placed candidate, as there had been between PCF and PS in many previous elections. Even the Greens, who did come to an agreement with the PS between the two rounds of the elections, won more seats than the Front de Gauche, although they had fewer votes.

Certainly, Mélenchon's style and rhetoric is probably quite a bit more radical than his proposals, many of which are no more to the left than Mitterrand's in 1981. But this spirit of resistance did capture the imagination of millions of voters, in part no doubt precisely because of the intransigent attitude towards social injustice. As a result, the more traditional far left did badly in 2012. The Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, which was established as a broader party in 2009, although drawing mainly on the membership of the Trotskyist Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, was split over its position on the Front de gauche and itself received only 1.15% of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections and less than 1% in the first round of the parliamentary elections. Moreover, Olivier Besancenot, the candidate who attracted 4% in 2007, was replaced by the less charismatic and less well known Philippe Poutou, and a significant minority tendency within the NPA left the party and joined the Front de gauche after the elections.

Conclusions: The return of the people?

The most significant immediate conclusion one should draw regarding the French presidential and parliamentary elections of 2012 is that they signalled in no uncertain terms the end of the Sarkozy era. The president who was characterised by bizarre and often manic personal behaviour and who combined this with many unpopular and some unfathomable new laws was made a thing of the past. François Hollande, by contrast, nurtured an almost ponderous image of sobriety and prudence, which distanced him not only from Nicolas Sarkozy but also from Dominique Strauss-Kahn, whose downfall surrounded by scandal and disgrace had so unexpectedly enabled Hollande's candidacy in the first place. Hollande and the PS's policies were indeed on the whole also cautious, and placed emphasis almost as much on the need to balance the books as on the much-discussed tax increases for the rich. But they certainly did seem to suggest that wealth was to be shared somewhat more equally, and that the rich were expected to take some responsibility for moving beyond the economic crisis.

The most revealing results, however, were those of Le Pen and the FN on the one hand and Mélenchon and the Front de gauche on the other. Although they were in many ways polar opposites, both candidates appealed to a France that had largely been bypassed by the fruits of prosperity and which had then been hardest hit by the international crisis. Some sense of this had already inspired Sarkozy's authoritarian populism in the 2007 campaign and it also inspired some of Hollande's mild radicalism in 2012. The factors which were conducive to Sarkozy's 'droite décomplexée' in 2007 led to at least a slightly more radical PS in 2012 and, even if the PS cannot be described as part of a 'gauche décomplexée', certain leading figures in the party believed that a reorientation in a more working class direction was necessary (see Beaumel and Kalfon 2011; Weber 2011). The *République du centre* (Furet et al. 1988) of the later Mitterrand years and beyond was certainly over, and one important determinant of the future of electoral and governmental politics in the medium term will be the relationship between the UMP and the FN.

We appear to be witnessing the return of ordinary working people and, in particular, the poor—perhaps best described in the traditional language of the left as *le peuple* or *les classes populaires*—as an acknowledged force in French politics. According to Chiriqui (2012), blue-collar workers (*ouvriers*) amount to 23% of the electorate, including the retired. However, in order to talk more meaningfully about the solidly working class vote, he argues, we now need to add to that figure increasing numbers of white-collar salaried workers (*employé(e)s*), who themselves make up 26% of the electorate. The effects of the increasingly global economy, the greater dominance of the financial sector, the pressure to consume ever-more commodities, all followed by economic crisis and falling living standards for many of these people, have further marginalised both blue-collar workers and many white-collar workers. Thus the myth of inevitable 'embourgeoisement' for virtually all those lower down in the social hierarchy is, for the moment at least, dead, and many people either are experiencing a drop in living standards or are fearful of doing so. This does not mean there is immediate hope for an enduring and substantial movement

to the left of the PS, as witnessed by the strength of the popular vote for Le Pen. What it does suggest, however, is a politics where questions of social class and questions regarding the ethics of wealth and privilege gain greater prominence. With overall unemployment at over 10%, youth unemployment at 23%, and with living standards almost static overall and falling for many, there can be no pretence at general wellbeing, and the cases of Greece and Spain loom as even worse possible scenarios. This has contributed to the fact that the politics of liberalism that had influenced both the later Mitterrand years and the Chirac presidency have worn very thin.

Fundamental questions are thus being posed regarding income distribution, social justice and the responsibility of the wealthy. The inability on the part of governing politicians to address these questions satisfactorily has allowed the FN to blame immigration for most of France's socio-economic ills (Miquet-Marty 2011). This most recent crisis of the capitalist economy is exerting great pressure on French politics and is giving rise to consideration of radical proposals, as it has in Greece as well, in particular. The *Economist* (2012) suggested in so many words during the presidential campaign that the French needed to work longer hours, take wage cuts and suffer a deterioration in public services. But current material hardships are also prompting questions about whether a profoundly human needs-oriented approach is plausible and desirable. In other words, the stakes are getting higher but at the same time perhaps clearer. For the moment, however, Hollande and the PS will walk a left-of-centre tightrope, which may in the medium term prove as dangerous as a more radical trajectory.

Notes

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