

# Expect the unexpected: the 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections

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## Expect the unexpected: the 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections

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### ABSTRACT

The 2017 French presidential campaign was in many respects very different from all of its predecessors in the Fifth Republic. The same might also be said of the parliamentary contest that followed a few weeks later. Both elections were characterised by two complementary features – *le déagisme* and *le renouvellement* – that together contributed to the sense that in 2017 French politics underwent a radical transformation, including a major shake-up of the party system and a significant renewal of the political class in both the executive and the legislature. In this vein the article analyses key features of both campaigns, selectively using comparator reference points from previous Fifth Republic elections where appropriate. In contrast, in the concluding section on the early weeks of the Emmanuel Macron presidency, the article highlights important elements of continuity with previous presidencies in terms of leadership style and policy initiatives.

### RÉSUMÉ

La campagne présidentielle française de 2017 était à beaucoup des égards très différente de toutes celles qui l'avaient précédée au cours de la Cinquième République. Nous pourrions en dire autant de l'élection parlementaire qui l'a suivie quelques semaines plus tard. Ces deux élections se sont caractérisées par deux traits complémentaires – le déagisme et le renouvellement – qui ont tous les deux contribué au sens qu'en 2017 la politique en France a subi une transformation radicale, y compris un bouleversement du système de partis et un renouveau significatif de la classe politique dans l'exécutif et la législature à la fois. Dans cet esprit, l'article analyse des éléments clés des deux campagnes, se servant de plusieurs points de comparaison révélateurs tirés des élections précédentes qui se sont déroulées sous la Cinquième République. Par contraste, dans la dernière partie de l'article qui traite le sujet des premières semaines de la présidence d'Emmanuel Macron sont soulignés certains éléments de continuité avec des présidences précédentes en ce qui concerne le style de leadership et les politiques publiques.

In the book by Gérard Courtois, commentator journalist on *Le Monde*, about presidential election campaigns in the Fifth Republic from 1965 to 2012, the introductory chapter is entitled 'Une campagne ne se passe jamais comme prévu' (Courtois 2017, 7–16). In any future edition Courtois may well want to keep this title in reserve for his chapter on the 2017 presidential election, because in throwing up a whole series of surprises the 2017 campaign was in many respects very different from all of its predecessors. The first presidential contest to be held during a state of emergency, this was a campaign like no other before. The same might also be said of the parliamentary contest that followed a few weeks later. Both elections were characterised by two complementary features – *le dégaisme* and *le renouvellement* – that together contributed to the sense that in 2017 French politics underwent a radical transformation. The result of the two elections was not simply a changeover of personnel, as had happened in the many transfers of power involving Left and Right between 1981 and 2012, but a radical shake-up of the party system and a significant renewal of the political class in both the executive and the legislature.

The aim of this article is to develop these points over five chronological sections that cover a seven-month period from the decision by François Hollande in December 2016 not to seek a second presidential term to the aftermath of the parliamentary election of June 2017. These sections analyse key features of the 2017 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, selectively using comparator reference points from previous Fifth Republic elections where appropriate. In contrast, the sixth and final section with its focus on the early weeks of the Emmanuel Macron presidency argues that in several key aspects the 2017 elections were marked by important elements of continuity. The election of Macron to the Élysée and of a supportive majority, dominated by his party *La République en marche* (LRM), to the National Assembly should not be taken to indicate a sweeping change in all features of Fifth Republic politics. Indeed, in certain vital respects quite the reverse is the case.

## The absent president

The first respect in which the 2017 presidential campaign differed from its predecessors was the decision by Hollande not to stand for a second term of office. By the end of 2016 Hollande had endured more than four years of very high levels of unpopularity for a sitting president, with a mere 15 per cent of voters satisfied with his performance in November 2016 (IFOP 2016). In part, this unpopularity was attributable to his record. Early tax hikes that had hit some of the less well-off sections of society, the failure to take strong measures to rein in the excesses of banks (ironically, Hollande had singled out 'the world of finance' as his 'real opponent' in the launch speech of his presidential campaign at Le Bourget in January 2012), a marked increase in unemployment during his five-year term, failure to renegotiate European treaties to include a stronger commitment to growth, a series of communication errors by the president and government ministers that gave an impression of amateurishness, the Cahuzac financial fraud scandal that destroyed Hollande's pledge to establish an exemplary Republic, a disastrous proposal on nationality rights in the wake of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, controversial labour reform measures introduced towards the end of his presidential term, and a series of setbacks for the Socialist party in second-order elections (municipal, European, departmental, regional) during his *quinquennat* – all of these could be firmly placed on the debit side of the presidential balance sheet (Bazin 2017).

Yet it was not just the president's record that was the problem. It was also a sense, reflected in successive voter surveys, that Hollande did not fully embody the presidential function, that in some key respects he did not measure up to the stature of the role (Gaffney 2015). Only occasionally, such as in his response to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in January 2015 or his swift commitment to the dispatch of French military forces to Mali in 2013, did Hollande seem to assume the mantle of the supreme office and provide the decisive leadership that the overwhelming majority of French citizens craved. More generally, many voters seemed to agree with the assessment made by François Fillon that Hollande might have been elected president but he had never been head of state (Fressoz 2016).

In December 2016 Hollande announced live on television his decision not to run again. The decision was unprecedented in the history of the Fifth Republic. Every previous incumbent president who had had the opportunity to seek a second successive term had done so: three successfully (General de Gaulle in 1965, François Mitterrand in 1988, and Jacques Chirac in 2002) and two unsuccessfully (Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1981 and Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012). Hollande's decision not to run was influenced by two potential negative scenarios: either that he would be humiliated in the first round of the election and, like the Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin in 2002, would not proceed to the decisive second round; or, an even gloomier prospect, that he would be defeated in the Socialist primary, which would become a referendum on his presidential record and leadership style, with ignominious failure as the likely outcome. In short, by the end of 2016 it was clear to Hollande that he could not bring together the required support across the left in general and within the Socialist Party in particular for a viable presidential candidacy.

Long-standing divisions within the left had become increasingly evident during Hollande's presidency. The first fissure was by no means new: that between the Socialist Party and its close allies on the one hand and the radical left (notably the Communist Party and La France insoumise) on the other. Jean-Luc Mélenchon personified the radical-left challenge to Hollande, constantly criticising the president's pro-market, social liberal economic policies. In addition, and more worryingly for the president, the so-called forces of the *gouvernement de gauche* had also become deeply divided during his five-year term. The Greens, for example, became more hostile to Hollande after the appointment of Manuel Valls as his second prime minister in the spring of 2014. Divisions within the Socialist Party also became more apparent as the presidency progressed, exacerbated by what the left of the party regarded as a series of economically liberal reforms (the responsibility pact, *la loi Macron*, *la loi El Khomri*) that in their eyes betrayed the values of the left.

This fracture within the ranks of the Socialists was personified by figures such as Benoît Hamon and Arnaud Montebourg on the left and Valls and Macron (a member of the Socialist government but not of the party) on the right. On several occasions during the Hollande presidency Socialist party rebels voted against government legislation, with some important measures such as the *loi Macron* and *loi El Khomri* controversially pushed through by means of the use of article 49.3 of the constitution.<sup>1</sup> While divisions within the Socialist Party were scarcely a novel development – the party has always been riven by factionalism (Clift 2005) – by the end of Hollande's presidency they appeared to have become unbridgeable, reflecting polarised visions of the values that should underpin the future governance of France. Moreover, Hollande as president had lost the art of synthesising different viewpoints to achieve some form of compromise – arguably one of his strengths as leader of the party between 1997 and 2008.

Hollande's weakness as the presidential incumbent was illustrated by the debate surrounding the holding of a primary contest to choose the Socialist candidate. A successful president would have been able to bypass this formality by imposing his candidacy on the party as the natural choice. Hollande's unpopularity meant that he was unable to do this. Instead, he had trapped himself by agreeing to the holding of a primary contest along the same lines of the one that had preceded the 2012 presidential election. However, while in 2011 Hollande had surfed to victory after the withdrawal of Dominique Strauss-Kahn from the race, five years later the situation was very different. The publication in October 2016 of a book based on a series of conversations between Hollande and two journalists of *Le Monde*, Gérard Davet and Fabrice Lhomme, in which the president made critical comments about fellow Socialist politicians and key institutions of the Republic (including the judiciary), accentuated the groundswell of opinion against him within his party. To many it seemed that Hollande preferred to comment on his presidential role rather than act as president (Davet and Lhomme 2016). Already undermined by Macron's resignation from the government in the summer of 2016 and the launch of his presidential candidacy in November, the *coup de grâce* for Hollande was provided by Prime Minister Valls, who signalled that he was willing to stand in the primary contest if Hollande did not, thereby effectively destroying the last vestiges of the president's residual legitimacy.

The result of Hollande's decision not to stand for a second term was not just that the incumbent was absent from the presidential contest or that the Socialist Party had to find an alternative candidate in a very short space of time. Nor was it just that none of the candidates in the presidential election overtly and explicitly presented themselves as Hollande's successor, the inheritor of his legacy. More importantly, in his absence Hollande's presidential record was barely discussed during the campaign; his presidency simply disappeared off the radar. There was little attempt by the various candidates or the media to subject his record to critical scrutiny, to evaluate what had worked, what had not and why. This meant, for instance, that elements of continuity in Macron's economic programme with measures taken under Hollande (for example, labour reform) were not fully explored, helping Macron in his strategy of presenting himself as an 'outsider' candidate with a new approach to dealing with France's economic ills.

### **Dysfunctional primaries?**

A second unprecedented aspect of the 2017 presidential campaign was the conduct and outcome of the two open primary contests, first of the Right and Centre (November 2016) and then of the Socialist Party and close allies (January 2017). The decision by the Right and Centre to hold an open primary was driven by two factors: first, the exercise undertaken by the Socialists in 2011 had been a huge success in attracting voter interest, raising funds and giving the winner unchallenged legitimacy as the party's presidential candidate; second, after years of division at the top of the party, the main force of the Right, Les Républicains, had no clear unchallenged candidate, in contrast to 2007 when Sarkozy had imposed himself as the obvious choice. The open primary was thus seen as a way of resolving party divisions and rallying behind a single candidate, in the knowledge that if the Right presented separate candidates in the first round of the presidential election, as had happened in 1988 and 1995, it was quite possible that in 2017 neither would go through to the second round.

In stark contrast to the Socialist Party primary in 2011 both open primaries revealed important substantive divisions between the programmes of the leading candidates; both primaries were also characterised by a hard-hitting, verbally robust style of campaigning; and, above all, both contests failed to unite the respective parties behind the winners. Fillon and Hamon could both be regarded as being from the less moderate wings of their party and both campaigned on radical programmes of change. Fillon espoused an economically liberal and socially conservative programme that was strong on French identity and anti-Islamism and that placed him well to the right of the longtime frontrunner and the polls' favourite to win the primary, Alain Juppé. In a decision that was to come back to haunt him, Fillon also made his credentials as a politician of probity a major part of his appeal. Having participated in various parliamentary rebellions against Hollande's reforms, Hamon continued to distance himself from the incumbent's legacy, playing up his environmental credentials and calling for the introduction of a universal income as a means of addressing the downside of economic dislocation.

In the primary of the Right and Centre Fillon's success over Juppé was a major surprise in a contest that had initially been presented by the media as a straight fight for the nomination between Juppé and Sarkozy. Juppé's positioning to appeal to centre voters, which might well have made him a good presidential candidate, failed in a primary dominated by voters whose values were clearly well to the right (Boyer 2017). Sarkozy never managed to reproduce the enthusiasm that had been such a notable feature of his March towards the presidency in 2007, in part because his reputation had been sullied by a series of scandals surrounding the financing of his 2012 campaign. Hamon's surprising success was in coming well ahead of Montebourg in the first round. His defeat of Valls in the run-off could be expected in that Valls, who represented continuity with the unpopular Hollande presidency, had never been popular with many Socialist Party members and voters from the Left broadly defined. As a result of the two primary contests a total of four major politicians (and a host of less major ones) had been eliminated from contention in the 2017 presidential election: one former president (Sarkozy), two former prime ministers (Juppé and Valls) and one former leading minister in the Socialist government (Montebourg).

After their victories in the primaries, neither Fillon nor Hamon succeeded in fully mobilizing leading figures in their respective parties behind their candidacy. While Fillon gained at least lip-service support from his defeated opponents after his primary victory (up to the start of judicial proceedings being announced in late February when support from leading party figures visibly and extensively drained away), this was not the case with Hamon. Various leading members of the Socialist Party, including Hollande's minister of Defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, refused to support Hamon and, some more explicitly than others, instead lent their support to Macron. The ultimate stab in the back for Hamon came from Valls, who announced in late March that he would support Macron in the first round, having previously assured Hamon that he would have his support if Hamon won the primary. Hamon later returned the favour by calling on voters to vote for the France insoumise candidate against Valls in the parliamentary election.

The two primary contests allowed large numbers of voters to participate directly in the choice of each party's presidential candidate: over four million for the primary of the Right and Centre and two million in the second round of the Socialist contest. However, both primaries masked rather than resolved the problems of strategy, policy, and leadership that had been such a dominant feature of both camps since at least Hollande's victory in 2012.

Not surprisingly, after the elimination of both Fillon and Hamon in the first round of the presidential contest, the open primary system came in for much criticism. It appeared to have produced unelectable candidates, notably in the case of Hamon, who secured only 6.36 per cent vote share, the worst result in the history of the Socialist party since its refoundation in 1971. Critics argued that in 2016–17 too much had been asked of the primaries in resolving questions of strategic direction and leadership that the parties had been unable to resolve internally (Europe1.fr 2017). There is much to be said for these criticisms. It is also important to remember, however, that without the primaries French voters would in all likelihood have been faced in the first round of the presidential election with a rerun of the Hollande/Sarkozy/Marine Le Pen competition of 2012, a scenario rejected in successive electoral surveys by an overwhelming majority of voters. In any event, for good or ill, the primaries made a major contribution to the twin processes of *dégagisme* and *renouveau* that were such a feature of the 2017 elections.

### Presidential election first round: a four-horse race

Whatever the total number of candidates (11 in 2017), normally the first round of presidential elections is dominated by two or three serious contenders in the fight to go through to the decisive second round, where only two candidates are permitted by the rules to remain in contention. Sometimes it has been reasonably clear in advance which two candidates would qualify: de Gaulle and Mitterrand in 1965, when the only question was whether there would be any need for a second round; Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand in both 1974 and 1981; Sarkozy and Hollande in 2012. Sometimes there has been division within the Right, making for a genuine first-round contest for supremacy within this camp: Chirac versus Raymond Barre in 1988; Chirac versus Edouard Balladur in 1995. In 2007 François Bayrou temporarily disturbed the anticipated head-to-head battle between Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, while in 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen upset the expected run-off between Chirac and Jospin. Sometimes two, sometimes three major candidates – that was the conventional template for the first round of presidential election campaigns in the Fifth Republic (Bréchon 2013).

In contrast, in 2017 no fewer than four candidates on the day of the first round of voting had a realistic possibility of acceding to the second round: Macron, Marine Le Pen, Fillon, and Mélenchon. Each of the four represented a distinctive set of values: pro-European liberal progressivism (Macron); Europhobic anti-liberal populism (Le Pen); economically liberal social conservatism (Fillon); and eurosceptic statist progressivism (Mélenchon). Yet all four had one thing in common: all of them, including Fillon, as a former prime minister, and Macron, as a former minister of the Economy, presented themselves as to some extent 'anti-system' candidates in an attempt to surf on the popular climate (which, of course, they had helped to inspire and maintain) of *dégagisme* and *renouveau*. With four candidates scoring just over/under 20 per cent in opinion polls right up to the first round, this meant that there were no fewer than six possible run-off scenarios for the second round – an unprecedented confusion as to the possible outcome of the first round of voting.

The range of possible second-round outcomes of this four-horse race had an impact on voter behaviour, with opinion poll evidence distributed via the media influencing the strategic choices of voters prior to the first round. Traditional party loyalties had weakened over the years, as part of a long-term process of partisan dealignment linked to social change, voter disaffection with mainstream parties, and a high degree of scepticism towards



politicians and the political process. The standard rule in previous presidential elections was that in the first round voters chose their first-preference candidate (*on choisit*) and in the second they eliminated the candidate further from their preferences (*on élimine*). In 2017, however, many voters, especially on the left, did not choose their first-preference candidate, but rather voted strategically to prevent certain second-round scenarios from coming to fruition – a so-called ‘*vote utile*’. The assumption, long supported by polls, that Le Pen would definitely occupy one of the two spots in the second round (a very different situation from 2002) meant that anti-Le Pen voters had to consider which candidate would have the best chance of defeating the Front national (FN) candidate in the run-off. For instance, voters on the left had to consider the anathema possibility of a Fillon-Le Pen run-off (Rousset 2017). Similarly, voters across the broad centre-left/centre-right mainstream faced the nightmare possibility of a second round contest between Mélenchon and Le Pen.

With regard to the result of the first round, here too we were in unprecedented territory for presidential elections in the Fifth Republic. On two previous occasions the Socialist candidate had failed to get through to the second round (Gaston Defferre in 1969 and Jospin in 2002); in contrast, a candidate of the mainstream Right had always featured in the second round. In 2017, however, both candidates of the two political families that had dominated the politics of the Fifth Republic over the previous forty years failed to progress. It is possible (though, of course, it cannot be tested) that any Socialist candidate apart from the incumbent president would have found it difficult to embed their candidacy in public opinion, given the constrained timetable imposed by the primary contest and the fractures within the party. All the other leading candidates (Macron, Fillon, Le Pen, Mélenchon) had been in the race since before the end of 2016.

Yet, more importantly there were particular problems that Hamon faced and indeed created for himself, some of which another Socialist candidate might well have avoided or coped with in a more effective manner. Hamon initially spent time trying to persuade Mélenchon to withdraw his candidacy, which was always a vain hope. He also made few overtures towards the centre and right of the Socialist party, although it is not clear that even if he had done so these would have had any success in the light of Hamon’s record of opposition to Hollande. His campaign was undermined by lack of support from many leading Socialists, by a programme that was difficult for voters to understand (universal income, tax on robots) and by a perception, encouraged by the media, that he lacked presidential stature. Once Hamon had been overtaken by Mélenchon in the opinion polls after the TF1 television debate on 20 March involving the five ‘major candidates’ (YouTube 2017a), his drop in voter surveys was translated into a decline in media coverage – in a self-fulfilling dynamic, the lower Hamon went in the polls, the less the media considered him to be a serious candidate. Very quickly, the five-horse race lost a runner and rider.

The elimination of Fillon came at the end of a campaign that was a self-inflicted nightmare for the candidate of Les Républicains (Fenech 2017). After his victory in the primary, it was widely assumed that Fillon would be the next French president and that the Right would win a parliamentary majority on the coat-tails of his presidential victory. The reality came therefore as a profound shock to party members and supporters. The drop in Fillon’s support came in two stages. First, after his victory in the primary contest, certain aspects of his programme, notably on social security and health reform, came in for significant criticism, including within his own party. Although he still led in the polls at the end of 2016, support for Fillon dropped and the candidate had to try to reassure voters by watering down some



of the more radical elements of his reform proposals. The second drop in his support came after the revelations in the satirical weekly newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* in January 2017 concerning the employment of his wife, Penelope, as his parliamentary assistant – the so-called ‘Penelopagate’ affair (Lees 2017). This was the scandal that effectively holed Fillon’s campaign below the water line. We will never know whether without the scandal Fillon would have made it through to the second round or whether in any event his programme would have been judged too radical in comparison with that of Macron. Although in opinion polls Fillon never dropped much below 18 per cent, he was always behind Macron and Le Pen from January onwards. In the end, with a 20.01 per cent vote share, he did not fail by many votes to qualify for the second round (fewer than 500 000 behind Le Pen); but as Jospin found in 2002, failure is failure, even when the margin of defeat is small.

The 19.58 per cent vote share of Mélenchon put him in fourth place, just behind Fillon. Mélenchon’s score relative to Hamon’s on the left (19.58 v 6.36) was not hugely dissimilar to the first round in 1969 when the Communist candidate, Jacques Duclos, had scored 21.27 per cent against the 5.01 per cent of the Socialist candidate, Defferre. While Mélenchon may well have preferred to have had the opportunity of directing his invective against a Hollande candidacy, Hamon was not spared the attempt by the candidate of *La France insoumise* to ‘reshuffle the cards’ on the Left. Mélenchon skilfully used social media, notably his YouTube channel, to appeal to younger voters (YouTube 2017b). He also criticised traditional media for their alleged consensualism, while simultaneously securing significant mainstream media coverage for his campaign through the use of media-attractive ‘gimmicks’ such as the public meetings involving his hologram. While it was assumed by many commentators that destroying the Socialist Party and imposing hegemony on the Left was the sum of Mélenchon’s ambitions, the candidate clearly felt otherwise. He remarked that he was in the contest to win the presidency and on the night of the first-round result he seemed taken aback that he had failed to proceed to the second round, refusing to call explicitly for a vote for Macron against Le Pen.

Marine Le Pen, as expected, won through to the second round, with a vote share of 21.30 per cent and over 7.5 million votes, the highest vote share and number of votes of any extreme-right candidate in a presidential election – yet another unprecedented aspect of the 2017 contest. Le Pen topped the first-round poll in 47 out of 101 *départements* (Macron led in 42) and eight out of the 13 regions (Macron was first in the other five). Her vote was particularly impressive in villages and small towns, among workers and the young. Yet her first-round score was disappointing in the light of the expectations that had previously been raised. In the early weeks of the campaign opinion polls had placed her in first position, with 26/27 per cent vote share. In the end her vote share was less than the FN had received in the first round of three second-order electoral contests during the Hollande presidency, albeit on a much lower turnout: 2014 European elections, FN 24.86 per cent (42.43 per cent turnout); 2015 departmental elections, FN 25.24 per cent (50.17 per cent turnout); 2015 regional elections, FN 27.73 per cent (49.91 per cent turnout). The higher turnout in the presidential election compared to these second-order contests thus worked to the disadvantage of Le Pen in terms of national vote share.

Le Pen fought a subdued first-round campaign, appearing to hold her fire for the second round, with the notable exception of her statement on 9 April about France not being responsible for the Vél d’Hiv roundup of Jews in July 1942, which undermined the image of *La France Apaisée* that had been one of her campaign slogans in 2016. Since becoming leader

of the Front national in 2011 she had enjoyed less negative coverage from mainstream media than her father: partly because her detoxification strategy, however limited in substance, had worked in distancing the party from the worst excesses of her father's reign and partly because in 2017 she was seen as a credible presidential candidate, even if no opinion poll ever showed her to be a possible eventual winner.

Macron had some of the features of a serious *présidentiable*: graduate of the prestigious *École nationale d'administration*, leading member of President Hollande's *cabinet* at the Élysée, and government minister (Prissette 2017). However, he had never participated as a candidate in an election prior to the 2017 presidential contest; he was a total novice to electoral politics, whether at the local, regional, national, or supranational level. This marked him out from the other three front runners. Both Le Pen and Mélenchon had been candidates in the 2012 presidential election, as well as standing against each other in the parliamentary election that followed. Fillon had not previously been a presidential candidate, but he had won election as *député*, mayor and president of a regional council. In addition, every previous successful presidential candidate in the Fifth Republic had held an elected post before becoming president, with the single and notable exception of de Gaulle.

Furthermore, Macron was relatively inexperienced in the world of party politics; he had been a member (but not a leading light) of the Socialist Party between 2006 and 2009. Rather than try to take over an existing political force, instead he launched his own movement *En marche !* in spring 2016. Thus, just over one year prior to the presidential election, Macron started his journey towards the Élysée without a big party machine behind him. His movement, built from scratch, was put in place to serve his presidential ambitions; *En marche !* was the creation of Macron, rather than Macron being the selected representative of a party. He secured financial aid from private donors and at a critical juncture of the campaign gained the support of Bayrou, who had stood as the centrist candidate in the three previous presidential contests. Although his social and economic programme was often criticised for being rather vague (Lhaïk 2017), Macron won generally positive media coverage through a combination of novelty ('the new kid on the block'), his successful playing on voter disillusionment with the established political class, and a skilful political communication strategy that embraced both social and mainstream media and frequently placed his marital relationship with Brigitte centre stage. One of his rare communication errors was to celebrate his first-round victory (24.01 per cent vote share, lower than both Hollande in 2012 [28.40 per cent] and Sarkozy in 2007 [31.18 per cent]) as if he had already won the presidency, which to all intents and purposes he had.

### **Presidential election second round: electoral suicide by television**

Several aspects of the second round of the presidential election were also unprecedented – or almost. The first is that normally the second round run-off is a straight fight between candidates of the mainstream Right and Left, reflecting the bipolarisation of electoral politics that has been a longstanding feature of the Fifth Republic (Grunberg and Haegel 2007). Of the nine presidential contests prior to 2017, seven had been a Right-Left battle. The two exceptions were 1969, when the run-off involved a candidate from the Right (Georges Pompidou) against one from the Centre (Alain Poher), with all candidates of the Left eliminated in the first round; and again in 2002, with the run-off between a candidate

from the Right (Chirac) and from the extreme right (Jean-Marie Le Pen), with once more all candidates of the Left eliminated.

In 2017 not only was there no candidate from the Left in the second round, but there was no candidate from the mainstream Right either. The bipolarising institutional and electoral logics of the Fifth Republic, which for most of the regime's history had underpinned a second-round contest between parties and candidates of mainstream Right and Left, had on this occasion ceased to function, reflecting changes in social and political fault lines and resulting in new realignments. In one respect this was not wholly unanticipated, as the rise of the FN during the Hollande presidency had led to some commentators talking of a tripolarisation, at least provisional, of electoral competition between the Left, Right, and extreme right (Bazin 2015; Revault d'Allonnes 2015). What was comparatively new in the first round in 2017 was, first, the breakthrough of Macron in the centre at the expense of both Socialists and Les Républicains and, second, of Mélenchon on the radical left to the detriment of the Socialist Party.

A second unprecedented feature was that Le Pen revealed who would be her prime minister in the event of her victory: Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, leader of the right-wing sovereignist party, Debout la France. The rallying to Le Pen by Dupont-Aignan was not significant in terms of the transfer of his first-round electoral support to her candidacy. Symbolically, however, it marked the first time that another party had agreed to support the FN at the second round of a national election; a taboo had been broken, albeit only temporarily since in the face of criticism from leading members of his party, Dupont-Aignan quickly withdrew from the agreement he had made with the FN regarding a carve-up of constituencies in the parliamentary election (Bacqué and Faye 2017a).

Third, there was the inter-round television debate between Macron and Le Pen. The idea of such a debate was by no means new. The first had taken place in 1974 (Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand) and a version had occurred in every presidential election since, with the exception of 2002 when Chirac had refused to debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen. What was new in 2017 was not the principle, format, or general themes of the debate, but rather the particularly barbed nature of the verbal exchange between the two protagonists. Le Pen's strategy seemed to consist of simply attacking Macron in the most aggressive manner possible. The longer the debate went on, the more the inadequacy of this strategy became clear. When the FN candidate displayed her lack of knowledge about the working of the European single currency, she was put on the spot by her opponent and her credentials as a serious contender for the presidential office were seriously called into question. Constantly looking at her notes (compared to Macron who apparently knew his dossiers by heart), Le Pen looked out of her depth, with even her own supporters recognizing that she had performed badly (Bacqué and Faye 2017b). Polls taken after the debate confirmed that Macron had easily won the debate; in seriously underperforming Le Pen had committed electoral suicide by television.

A final unusual feature of the second round concerned turnout and the result. At 74.56 per cent turnout was low – the lowest since 1969 and the second lowest in the history of the Fifth Republic. Turnout was also lower than in the first round (77.77 per cent), again the first time that this had happened since 1969. Even more unusually, over 11.5 per cent of votes cast were either *blanc* or *nul*, an extremely high percentage that showed a reluctance of a significant section of the electorate to choose between the two contenders left in the race. In terms of the result, Le Pen secured over ten and a half million votes, by far the highest

score for the extreme right in the history of the Fifth Republic. Her vote share of 33.90 per cent was, however, disappointing, well below her target figure of 40 per cent. Macron's vote share of 66.10 per cent was the second highest of any second-round winner, exceeded only by Chirac's 82.21 per cent in 2002. At first sight this was a hugely impressive result, even if it fell short of a triumphant coronation. However, almost six of every ten Macron voters voted primarily to block Le Pen, rather than give a positive vote (*vote d'adhésion*) for Macron: thus the result was far from a ringing endorsement for the victor (Paris Match 2017).

### Parliamentary election: the victory of a new Macronist generation

The parliamentary election that followed a few weeks after the presidential contest further continued the related processes of *dégagisme* and *renouvellement*. The first notable feature of the parliamentary election was the unprecedentedly high level of abstentionism. In the first round less than half the electorate (48.7 per cent) bothered to vote. *Le Monde* chose to highlight this aspect on its front page (13 June) by reporting the vote share of the main parties as a percentage of all registered voters rather than simply of those who had turned out to vote. This showed that LRM gained the support of only just over 15 per cent of the total registered electorate, even though it secured over 30 per cent of the vote (the later official figure was lower still). The second-round turnout (42.6 per cent) was the lowest ever at a parliamentary election in the Fifth Republic, and for some critics raised the issue of the legitimacy of LRM's victory.

The second feature was the large parliamentary majority secured by LRM. LRM's 28.21 per cent of vote share in the first round translated into an initial total of 308 seats out of 577 (53.38 per cent) following the second round. The result meant that LRM did not require the support of its coalition partner MoDem (42 seats after the second round) to form a parliamentary majority. While it is not unprecedented for a single party to have a parliamentary majority in the Fifth Republic, the success of LRM in 2017 has to be placed in the context of a party (or movement) that was established only just over one year previously and whose values were wholly and exclusively personified in its leader. This made its election success all the more remarkable when compared with that of the Gaullists in 1968 and the Socialists in 1981, both of which had been in existence for a considerable time as party organisations, were associated with a well-defined set of values, and were closely associated with the long-standing political careers of de Gaulle and Mitterrand respectively.

The parliamentary victory of LRM made a significant contribution to the sense of political renewal (*Le Monde* 2017a). Over 70 per cent of the *députés* elected in 2017 were newcomers to parliament (415 out of 577). This was in part because many incumbent *députés* were defeated, usually by LRM candidates, but also because many incumbents chose not to stand because of the new rules preventing joint office-holding (*cumul des mandats*). 216 incumbents decided not to stand again, more than double the figure in 2007 and 2012. In large part thanks to LRM there was a significant increase in the number of female representatives in the National Assembly – 223 (38.6 per cent) compared with 155 (26.9 per cent) in 2012. LRM had chosen to abide by the parity legislation regarding selection of parliamentary candidates and this, combined with its nationwide electoral success, meant that many women stood as candidates in what became, not always predictably, winnable seats. The LRM result also meant the election of many apparent newcomers to representative politics. Macron had pledged that half of LRM candidates would come from civil society. While the application

of this concept was somewhat fluid in that it did not rule out persons with previous political experience, nonetheless many LRM *députés* were novices to electoral politics. Finally, about fifteen ethnic minority *députés*, mainly from LRM, were elected; about twice as many as in 2012, although still far short of numerical representativeness in relation to the electorate as a whole (Slate 2017).

The two forces that had dominated French politics for over forty years, the Right and the Socialists, were both significant losers in the parliamentary election. With 15.77 per cent first-round vote share and 112 *députés* after the second round, Les Républicains emerged as the main force of opposition in the new parliament – in numerical terms at least. For a party that at the start of the year had confidently expected to win the presidency, occupy key ministerial positions, and dominate the National Assembly, the effect of the 2017 results was chilling. With Sarkozy, Juppé, and Fillon out of contention, Les Républicains had no clear leader; nor did it have an agreed strategy on how to respond to Macron's policy initiatives, notably on economic reform; and it was unclear what values Les Républicains represented that differentiated the party from LRM to its left and the FN to its right.

Leading figures on the Right had been divided on how to respond to Macron's presidential victory. Some had taken up posts in government, such as the new prime minister, Édouard Philippe, and minister of the Economy, Bruno Lemaire, while others, such as former prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, were de facto supporters of Macron, so-called *Macron-compatibles*. Immediately after the parliamentary election some Républicain *députés* joined with the 18 representatives from the Union des démocrates et indépendants to form a centre-right parliamentary group of 35 *députés* that adopted a so-called 'constructive' posture towards the new government, while most Républicain *députés* adopted a position of opposition. There was even some speculation that this might be followed by a major fissure within Les Républicains between a socially and economically moderate, pro-European group on the one hand and a more eurosceptic, socially authoritarian wing on the other (Laubacher 2017).

The problems facing the Right paled into insignificance, however, when compared to those of the Socialist Party. In 2012 the Socialists had dominated the representative institutions of the Fifth Republic at both national and sub-national levels: the presidency, premiership, government, both chambers in parliament and a majority of the regions, large towns, and departments were all in Socialist hands. Five years later, the party appeared to be in its death throes. In the parliamentary election a whole swathe of Socialist *députés* were defeated, most in the first round. Nothing seemed to make any difference: support of or opposition to Hollande's presidency, a relative newcomer or years of parliamentary experience, local implantation or a ministerial track record – all counted for nought in the face of the LRM tsunami. Big names defeated in the first round included Hamon, Aurélie Filippetti, Jean Glavany, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, Daniel Vaillant, and Élisabeth Guigou, while in the second round Myriam El Khomri and Marisol Touraine, both former ministers under Hollande and both close to Macron, also lost.

The Socialist Party had a vote share of 7.44 per cent in the first round and gained 30 seats following the second. The Socialists were completely eliminated from their traditional bastions in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais, while the financial impact of the result meant that there was talk of the party having to sell its headquarters in the rue de Solférino. The party was in a similar state to when Mitterrand had taken over its leadership in 1971; except this time round there was no Mitterrand, no sense of optimism, no figure to impose unity, no

vision of a future France under Socialist rule. With social democratic parties across Europe facing huge difficulties in the face of social change, economic dislocation, and globalisation (Diamond 2016), the problems facing the French Socialist Party in 2017 were by no means unique. But this was scant consolation in the face of a double electoral rout.

The parties of the radical left and extreme right fared no better. Without the media coverage and lacking the personalised focus of the presidential campaign, both the FN and La France insoumise struggled to make much headway in the constituency-based parliamentary contest. Both suffered from the demobilisation of large sections of their electorate, notably among workers and the young. At least some FN voters seemed to have been disappointed by Marine Le Pen's second-round score in the presidential election and in particular by her hugely disappointing performance in the television debate (Pierron 2017). The claim that the party had made in 2014 and 2015 to be the leading party in France now had a hollow ring to it, even if Le Pen herself was able to secure election in the Hénin-Beaumont constituency, which she had narrowly failed to win in 2012. The party secured 13.20 per cent of the vote in the first round and won a total of 8 seats (1.38 per cent) after the second, an insufficient number to form a recognised group in the National Assembly. Yet again the FN (along with La France insoumise) was the major victim of the two-ballot electoral system in terms of the disproportionate ratio of votes to seats.

La France insoumise also suffered as part of the general voter demobilisation, with Mélenchon one of its few parliamentary candidates to secure election. The party won 11.03 per cent of the vote in the first round and ended up with 17 *députés* following the second round, just sufficient to form a parliamentary group. The Communist party won 2.72 per cent of the first-round vote and secured 10 seats after the second round, forming a parliamentary group with some *députés* from overseas constituencies. Finally, despite an electoral system about as far removed from proportional representation as can be, in 2017 lots of different political forces gained some representation in the National Assembly, including three *députés* from the Corsican nationalist party. The total of seven parliamentary groups was the highest ever number at the start of a new legislature in the Fifth Republic; this healthy pluralism – or undesirable fractionalism – was another novelty of the 2017 electoral cycle. One of the first acts of the new parliament was to vote on the policy speech (*discours de politique générale*) of the new prime minister: the number of abstentions (129) was the highest ever for such a speech, one more unprecedented aspect of French politics in 2017.

## Old wine in new bottles?

Important aspects of the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections were at the very least unusual and quite often unprecedented, with many instances of *dégagisme* and *renouvellement* in what *The Guardian* called 'Macron's quiet revolution of the centre' (*The Guardian* 2017). Yet at the same time there were also strong elements of continuity with what had gone before.

First, as both candidate and then president, Macron proposed no radical reform of the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic. Indeed, institutional reform was not a major issue of the presidential campaign, even if Mélenchon called for the establishment of a constituent assembly to prepare for the launch of a Sixth Republic. Indeed, Macron had a classic Gaullian view of the role of the office of the presidency, believing in presidential pre-eminence and strong personalised leadership, with his prime minister in a clearly



subordinate role. In the early weeks of his presidency he focused on the classic areas of presidential rule (foreign affairs, defence, Europe) but also set the main orientations of policy in domestic areas such as labour reform and public sector expenditure. Macron sought to exercise close control of his image, with a strong reliance on social media as a means of public communication; unlike Hollande, he did not engage in close relations or background briefings with journalists from traditional media during the early weeks of his presidency, preferring to allow mediated images (for example, the pointedly firm handshake at his meeting with US President Donald Trump on 25 May) to convey the intended message. In short, Macron initially cultivated the image of a so-called Jupiterean president, a republican monarch, in the belief that this is what French voters wanted. Initially it seemed to work: in May, 62 per cent of voters were satisfied with Macron, while in June this had increased to 64 per cent (IFOP 2017a).

However, following various policy announcements during the summer, including a well-publicised spat with the head of the military, General Pierre de Villiers, over cuts in the defence budget, reductions in local government finance, and a lowering of the accommodation subsidy to students, Macron's popularity dropped sharply to a 54 per cent positive rating in July, lower than that of either Sarkozy or Hollande during the same period of their presidential terms (IFOP 2017b). It then further dipped vertiginously to a 40 per cent positive rating in August – the post-election honeymoon period with voters had been short-lived. In response, Macron revised his communication strategy to engage more closely with political journalists in an attempt to explain and defend controversial government policies. These included the reform of employment legislation (*code du travail*), which now occupied centre stage on the political agenda, with street demonstrations planned by the CGT trade union and La France insoumise in September.

A second element of continuity is to be found in the 2017 parliamentary election result. Since the establishment of the presidential five-year term in 2000 and the decision to hold the parliamentary election after the presidential contest, the result of the parliamentary election has confirmed the primacy of the presidential contest by giving the head of state a legislative majority with which to govern. In 2002, 2007, and 2012 the winning candidates in the presidential election (Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande respectively) all secured a supportive majority in the National Assembly. There was speculation in advance of the presidential election in 2017 that Macron might struggle to emulate his immediate predecessors in this respect and would be unable to secure a stable and coherent parliamentary majority. The electoral pact between LRM and Modem was designed to maximise the chances of such success. In contrast, in the parliamentary campaign Les Républicains initially argued for the return of a period of cohabitation, whereby the president would be deprived of a stable majority in parliament. This argument failed miserably to find any favour with French voters. Instead, the refrain of 'giving the president a chance' was a constant mediated theme of the parliamentary campaign – and not only among LRM supporters. The institutional logic of the Fifth Republic – a strong executive backed by a parliamentary majority – was supported by the electoral logic of a sufficient number of voters.

A third element of continuity lies in Macron's ideological positioning. Macron launched his political movement En marche ! by arguing that it was 'neither of the Left nor the Right' and then changed this to 'both of the Left and the Right'. In so doing Macron was seeking to deny (or at least minimise) one of the classic cleavages of Fifth Republic politics and replace it with a cleavage of 'progressives' versus 'conservatives' (Marine Le Pen had preferred to talk



of ‘globalisers’ versus ‘patriots’). In electoral terms he was trying to deny the bipolarising logic of the institutions and electoral system of the Fifth Republic. He was not the first major presidential candidate to attempt this. Giscard d’Estaing, elected president in 1974, argued for a broad centre coalition that he argued could assemble two out of every three French voters. His Union pour la démocratie française (UDF) coalition was the attempt to reflect this aspiration in organisational terms. Giscard d’Estaing failed for two reasons: first, on the Right he was unable to break the dominant hold of the Gaullists, with whom the UDF remained a coalition partner; second, on the Left he was unable to prise the Socialist Party from its electoral and programmatic alliance with the Communists. Thus, instead of being able to eat into the votes of the Right and Socialists, as Macron was able to do, Giscard d’Estaing found his UDF caught in a pincer between the Gaullists and the Union of the Left. Macron is also similar to Giscard d’Estaing in his espousal of both social and economic liberalism, in his commitment to Europe and in his desire to reform France from the centre, leading one political analyst to argue that Macronism is a new Giscardism (Guénolé 2017).

The final area of continuity lies in certain policy options pursued by the new president and government. Four are briefly mentioned here. The first is the moralisation of public life to address perceived instances of financial malpractice by politicians and parties. The 2017 legislation builds on the reform introduced by Hollande in the wake of the Cahuzac scandal in 2013 (Chaffanjon 2013) and seeks to respond to high levels of public disquiet about the behaviour of the political class. Responsibility for introducing the new legislation was initially given to Bayrou as minister of Justice. Ironically, however, Bayrou and two other MoDem ministers were soon forced to resign from their government posts over allegations that MoDem parliamentary assistants in the European Parliament had breached the latter’s rules by working for the party in France. The legislation was passed in August, with one feature in response to the ‘Penelopegate’ affair being a ban on the employment of family members by parliamentarians. (*Le Monde* 2017b).

The second area of policy continuity concerns Europe, where Macron has attempted to breathe new life into the Franco-German axis that had often failed to function effectively during the Hollande presidency. Macron’s victory was welcomed by politico-media elites in Germany, while his proposed reforms of the French economy and labour market were welcomed by Merkel and the European Commission. A third element of policy continuity is in the area of labour reform, where Macron’s proposed changes are in the spirit of various measures introduced under Hollande, including the provisions of the 2016 *loi El Khomri*. A final element of continuity is in the field of counter-terrorism. During Hollande’s presidency various measures were taken to strengthen the role of the state in counter-terrorism activities. While Macron proposed to end the state of emergency provisions in the autumn of 2017, he also indicated his wish to embed some of them in ordinary legislation. While the form of the state’s response to the threat posed by terrorist attacks may have changed, much of the substance appears to remain intact.

## Conclusion

In many respects the long cycle of electoral contests in 2016–17 (primaries, presidential and parliamentary elections) marked a renewal of French politics. Figures who had dominated the political scene for years (Hollande, Sarkozy, Juppé, Fillon) effectively lost their frontline role at the national level; others, such as Montebourg, Hamon, and Valls, retreated to lick

their wounds and consider the reconstruction of their political careers. The two main political forces of French electoral politics in recent years – the Socialist Party and the Right – were faced with existential crises in response to their defeats in the presidential and parliamentary elections. A new, young president, a new prime minister, a National Assembly dominated by a new party, the triumph of the ‘outsiders’ and newcomers, more women in parliament – no wonder the term *renouveau* was so prevalent in media coverage of the 2017 elections.

Yet renewal in political representation was accompanied by some important elements of stability and continuity in terms, for instance, of presidential leadership style and policy direction. And, of course, many of the problems that President Macron faces are far from new: from the reduction of France’s public deficit to the high rate of unemployment. It remains to be seen whether we shall look back on the Macron presidency as a time of significant substantive policy reform or a period when renewal was simply limited to a change of faces at the top.

## Note

1. Under the terms of article 49.3 of the Fifth Republic constitution the prime minister may engage the responsibility of the government in the National Assembly on the vote of a financial bill (no limit to the use of the article) or any other bill (in this case the article can be used only once in a parliamentary session). The bill is considered as enacted unless a motion of censure, laid down in the following 24 hours, is passed. In effect, this means that parliamentary discussion on legislation is cut short and the government’s bill is forced through, unless the government is defeated in a censure motion by a majority of the total number of députés (i.e. at least 289 out of 577 in the current lower house) (Gouvernement.fr 2016). As prime minister, Valls used article 49.3 six times to push legislation through. The record was set by Prime Minister Michel Rocard between 1988 and 1991, with no fewer than 28 uses of the article (this was before the one-use-in-a-session limit was put in place).

## Disclosure statement

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