

**France after 2012**



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Edited by  
Gabriel Goodliffe and Riccardo Brizzi

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# Introduction

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*Gabriel Goodliffe*

On May 6, 2012 the Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande defeated incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round of the French presidential election to become the Fifth Republic's seventh president. Claiming just over 18 million ballots compared to the 16.86 million won by his opponent, he garnered 51.64 percent of the vote versus 48.36 percent for the latter. In turn, in the parliamentary elections that followed, the PS and its allies won an absolute majority of 314 seats (out of a total of 577) with parties of the left and center left winning 59 percent of the vote and over 340 seats in the second round. Thus, the 2012 national elections marked the first time that the Socialist candidate had won the presidency since 1988, as well as the advent of the first Socialist-led parliamentary majority and government since 1997.

A closer analysis of the results of the 2012 elections and of the campaign that preceded them suggests a number of continuities with and departures from previous presidential and parliamentary elections and campaigns. For obvious reasons, the lines of disjuncture are starkest in relation to the experience of the immediately preceding electoral cycle and presidential term, in this case the 2007 campaign and Nicolas Sarkozy's *quinquennat* (five year term). If we go farther back, however, we find that developments that appeared as departures over the relatively circumscribed span of five years in fact reveal themselves to belong to broader patterns of continuity that evolved over a longer period. For this reason it is necessary to compare the dynamics of the 2012 campaign and its outcomes not just to 2007, but also to 2002, 1995, 1988, and 1981, the year that marked the election of the first Socialist president and first Socialist-led parliamentary majority in the Fifth Republic's history.

In terms of identifying these departures and continuities over both the shorter and longer term, it is helpful to distinguish between two types of factors and trends. The first have to do with the contexts—political and

economic—in which electoral campaigns are conducted, and that thus invariably shape the respective fortunes of incumbents and challengers and the parties to which they belong, thereby giving their immediate significance to the results. Alongside these objective contextual variables that lie beyond the immediate capacity of electoral actors to shape events emerge subjective personal ones that can be resumed by the specific style, method, tone, and so on they adopt—particularly but not only in the presidential race—in order to bend the outcome in their favor. In 2012 as in preceding elections, these objective and subjective factors converged and interacted in particular ways, and it is instructive to see how the patterns of interaction that evolved over this latest election cycle can be compared to those that developed in 2007 and before.

The present volume identifies some of these patterns of interaction as they manifested themselves in the 2012 national campaign and election and illustrates how these resembled as well as distinguished themselves from preceding election cycles. It is divided into three parts. The first traces these patterns of interaction in light of the conduct of the 2012 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, the second illuminates them in the light of the election results themselves (i.e., the performance of the principal parties and candidates), and the third discusses them in terms of the principal policy challenges and choices confronting the incoming administration and government. Four broad themes run through the book and underpin the short-term disjunctures and longer-term continuities revealed by the 2012 campaign and its outcomes.

At a first, political level, beyond marking the first time a Socialist president had been elected since 1988 (on the parallels between François Hollande and François Mitterrand both as candidates and presidential figures, see chapter 2 by Gervasoni), the 2012 elections, in contrast to 2007 in which the candidates from the principal parties of government—the PS; Union for a Popular Movement (UMP); Democratic Movement (MoDem) / Union pour la Démocratie Française (Union for French Democracy, UDF); and the Greens—received 75.6 percent of the vote, marked a notable electoral erosion of the governing party candidates—67.3 percent—and a correlative resurgence of the antiestablishment vote. In particular, the record score of 17.9 percent (vs. 10.44 percent in 2007) garnered by Marine Le Pen, the Front National (FN) candidate, and of 11.1 percent by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the Front de Gauche (Left Front) candidate, meant that, when combined with the votes won by candidates from the small antisystem parties, nearly one in three French voters cast ballots in favor of candidates opposed to the policy courses enshrined by the governing parties. (For analyses of the respective campaigns run by these candidates and of their electoral performance, see chapter 6 by Buton and chapter 8 by

Goodliffe.) This was in stark contrast to the electoral performance of the centrist MoDem candidate François Bayrou who, after coming third in the first round of the 2007 election with 18.57 percent, was relegated to fifth place behind Le Pen and Mélenchon with only 9.13 percent in 2012. (On the campaign run by the centrist parties and Bayrou's failure to replicate his performance from 2007, see chapter 7 by Le Béguec.) Contrary, then, to the claim advanced in the wake of the 2007 elections that France was moving toward a consolidated bipartisan system of electoral competition and alternation,<sup>1</sup> the 2012 presidential elections suggest that fragmentation continues to be a significant trait of the French party system and partisan polarization to have an especial influence on electoral outcomes in the country.

Indeed, if we consider this phenomenon over the longer run, we find that the incidence of partisan polarization and fragmentation as a function of the proportion of the vote won by the parties of government has substantially increased since the 1980s. It fell from 92.7 percent and 81.2 percent in the 1981 and 1988 presidential elections, respectively,<sup>2</sup> compared to 67.3 percent today, thereby testifying to the growing influence of anti-system or protest parties in French politics. Accordingly, whereas the 2012 elections may have marked a departure from 2007 in terms of the degree of fragmentation and polarization of the French political landscape, they seem to confirm the longer-term advance of these tendencies over the previous three decades.

Second, at the level of the economy, it could be argued that the 2012 election campaign was informed by a much direr economic context than its predecessor. By the end of April 2012 (i.e., between the two rounds of the presidential election), unemployment had just reached the symbolic threshold of 10 percent, the highest level recorded since 1999 and hitting certain groups like immigrants and the young hardest, while economic growth was stagnant at 0 percent. (For the role played by the immigration issue in the campaign, see chapter 12 by Chebel d'Appollonia.) By contrast, in April 2007 unemployment had been at 8.4 percent and the growth rate positive at 0.5 percent. By the same token, the challenger and eventual election winner promised to break with the economic program of his predecessor. In lieu of the deflationary austerity and supply-side policies pursued by Nicolas Sarkozy in the hope of cutting government spending, suppressing wages, and stimulating private investment as a way of enhancing French competitiveness—policies approved by Germany not just to reduce France's budgetary and structural deficits, but also to address the European sovereign debt crisis—François Hollande has instead called for progrowth countercyclical policies designed to stimulate growth and employment by boosting consumer demand through state spending and

intervention. (On the economic challenges confronting François Hollande as well as the policy legacy left by his predecessor in this area, see chapter 9 by Fayette.) Not only does such a reflationary policy break with his predecessor's economic program, but it is also at loggerheads with German prescriptions for resolving the eurozone crisis, thereby portending conflict at the level of European economic management.

However, as in the case of the political developments informing the 2012 campaign, one can also point to more fundamental continuities with regard to the economic context that tend to attenuate the differences between 2012 and 2007. In the first place, if the dire economic and employment situation that followed the 2008 global financial crash and, starting in 2010, the European debt crisis, are certainly exceptional, it is worth noting that every French election since 1981 has been fought on the backdrop of economic and social crisis. Likewise, the issues foremost in voters' minds in successive national elections have been how to halt the rise of unemployment and, correlatively, increase their purchasing power. By the same token, policy shifts between candidates and governments, notably their choosing between supply- and demand-side policies as a solution to economic stagnation, is nothing new, with Socialist governments tending to favor the latter and governments of the right the former. Similarly, since the introduction of the single European market and the launch of the process of European Monetary Union (EMU), successive French governments have sought to counteract Germany's deflationary monetarist orthodoxy by calling for some form of European economic government that involves the following elements: greater political control of the central bank, loosening of the deflationary terms of the European Monetary System (EMS) / EMU), and some degree of statist intervention or industrial policy. Seen in this light, Hollande's call during the campaign to renegotiate the European fiscal compact agreed by German chancellor Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy in December 2011 in a reflationary direction is redolent of Lionel Jospin's attempt to modify the deflationary terms of the Stability Pact at the 1997 Amsterdam Summit, Jacques Chirac's pledge to renegotiate the conditions of EMU during the 1995 presidential election campaign, or the inclusion at French insistence of the provision that alongside the single market and monetary union, the European Union's (EU's) future economic prosperity also be based on the principles of social cohesion and social solidarity in a 1993 European Commission White Paper on "Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment," intended to complement the Maastricht Treaty.<sup>3</sup>

This last consideration points to a third contextual factor informing the 2012 campaign: the influence of Europe on French national elections. (On the direct and indirect intrusion of this issue in the campaign, see chapter

10 by Dehousse and Tacea.) Here, again, we see a contrast between the disjunction regarding the weight of Europe in the 2012 versus 2007 election campaigns on the one hand, and its growing longer-term salience as an issue in French national elections on the other. Indeed, whereas in 2007 European integration figured minimally as an issue in the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, in 2012, no doubt reflecting the intractability of the European sovereign debt crisis, it attained unprecedented prominence. Accordingly, both governing party candidates made Europe a key theme in their respective campaigns while it served as a fundamental foil structuring the discourses of the fringe party candidates. Thus, Europe had gone from being invisible but omnipresent in previous national contests to occupying front and center stage in the 2012 campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as the first analogy implicitly suggests, Europe has assumed an increasingly salient role in French national elections and politics in general. Indeed, since the latest round of European economic integration began in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the establishment of the single market and the launch of the process of monetary unification, Europe has become the object of increasingly contentious political debate in France. As the narrow victory by referendum of the Maastricht Treaty in September 1992 and the heavy referendum defeat of the draft European Constitutional Treaty in May 2005 attest, European integration has morphed into an increasingly fraught and risky subject for the pro-European governing parties, while emerging as a potent source of mobilization for Eurosceptic antisystem parties. As disquiet over the European debt crisis and its economic impact broadens into a more general rejection of the current trajectory of European integration,<sup>5</sup> the latter is bound to grow even more significant in structuring voters' choices over the coming years.

Last but not least, and perhaps most overtly, the 2012 campaign introduced a sharp contrast in leadership styles between the two governing party candidates. Defining himself against the impulsive, micro-managing and self-promoting "hyper-president" that was incarnated by Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande tried hard to present himself as a thoughtful, deliberate, and modest future president—traits that his campaign staff adroitly packaged under the rubric of "*monsieur normal*." Not only would such a strategy, his advisers believed, make it possible for him to connect with French voters while restoring the traditional solemnity associated by the latter with the presidential office, but it also heralded a restoration of the traditional division of executive power called for under the Fifth Republic's semipresidential constitution. (On the evolution of the presidential role over the course of the Fifth Republic, see chapter 1 by Sirinelli.) In contrast to his predecessor, once elected Hollande would allow his prime minister to attend to the day-to-day tasks of government, setting out only

the broad lines of domestic policy while immediately concerning himself with the conduct of foreign policy. (On the continuities and departures staked out in this area by the new administration with respect to its predecessor, see chapter 11 by Charillon.)

Yet this preoccupation with style and with projecting a certain image of leadership—of political decisiveness and voluntarism on the part of Sarkozy to break with the indolence of the Chirac years in 2007, or with normality and calm on the part of Hollande to break with Sarkozy's so-called hyper-presidency in 2012—testifies to a growing personalization of French electoral politics over the long run that was obfuscated by the contrasting styles presented by the governing party candidates in 2012. Of course, this personalization of electoral competition in France, particularly for the office of the presidency, is to some extent inevitable given the considerable powers afforded the president under the Fifth Republic, as well as the regal example set by Charles de Gaulle, the founding figure of the latter (not to mention François Mitterrand, who sought to emulate de Gaulle's example as the Fifth Republic's first Socialist president).

However, deeper institutional factors underlying the evolution of party politics under the Fifth Republic have also contributed to this greater personalization of elections. At one level, the growing professionalization of the political (particularly governing) parties, whereby candidates come to see politics less as a vocation and more as a career and in which institutional procedures have been instituted for selecting their candidates—i.e., the primary systems introduced within the PS in 2007 and since the last election, the UMP—served to paradoxically underscore the importance of the personal style and temperaments attributable to the latter. (On the phenomenon of professionalization that has overtaken the PS and the UMP over the previous election cycle, and specifically the internal procedures they have introduced to select their leaders and candidates, see chapters 4 by Haegel and 5 by Grunberg.) Hence, Mr. Hollande's "normal" allure ended up serving him well not only in contrast to the hyperactive Sarkozy in the presidential race, but also in contrast to the personal pathologies that were brought into the open by the Strauss-Kahn scandal and that constituted the backdrop against which the Socialist primary was held. In turn, at a second level, the growing political role played by protest parties in the French political debate and—at least in the case of the FN—their entrenchment on the fringes of the party system, has also placed a greater onus on the populist appeal of their respective leaders and candidates. Hence the intrinsic importance—previously highlighted by FN founder and president Jean-Marie Le Pen and now illustrated by his daughter and, on the far left, by Jean-Luc Mélenchon—of the oratorical skills and tribenary charisma displayed by these candidates to their



parties' electoral fortunes and their capacity to influence the national policy debate. Thus, though François Hollande represented a stark contrast from Nicolas Sarkozy in terms of his personal style and temperament—not to mention the communication techniques and platforms by which he brought these differences across—his campaign and subsequent victory very much reflected and testified to the growing personalization of French politics among both governing and antisystem parties. (On the role played by traditional and new media during the 2012 presidential campaign, see chapter 3 by Brizzi.)

In short, the specific differences and disjunctures that can be seen between the 2012 and 2007 election campaigns and results are subsumed by broader similarities and continuities that have come to characterize French national elections over the past three decades. Reflecting both the respective economic and political contexts in which these elections unfolded and the programs and styles evinced by the respective candidates, these similarities and differences are explored more fully in the chapters that follow. In turn, the latter consider the social, economic, and political trends as well as the policy successes and failures that are likely to mark Hollande's *quinquennat* based on an appraisal of his first year in power (see the conclusion by Brizzi). As such, the book not only seeks to explain the circumstances of his victory, but also assesses the significance of his presidency and the effectiveness of the government he has commissioned to sustain it.

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A final note on the timing of the publication of the U.S. edition of this volume and its implications for the discussion of the developments and arguments contained herein. The chapters were originally drafted in March/April 2013 in preparation for the Italian version of the book. The authors were asked to update their chapters for the present edition, but in some cases, particularly in respect to constantly evolving policy areas—the economy, foreign policy, immigration etc.—the shifts undergone in the intervening year and a half would have involved a major rewrite of their contributions and indeed, changed the volume's original orientation. Likewise, a number of significant political events—the replacement of the Ayrault cabinet by that of Manuel Valls in March 2014, and the subsequent collapse and reconstitution of the latter the following August, the victory of the Front National in the European elections in May 2014, and the resignation of Jean-François Copé as head of the UMP in the wake of the Bygmalion scandal in June 2014, for example—have unfolded and the partisan and policy contexts that informed them have changed over the past year, leaving time and space for their mention only in passing.

However, we believe that the fundamental debates and trends that are laid out in the following pages—and which directly shaped and led to the aforementioned developments—continue to be relevant and that they will remain so over the months and years ahead. Hence our decision to publish the book in its present form, despite these temporal lacunae.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Gérard Grunberg and Florence Haegel, *La France vers le bipartisme? La présidentialisation du PS et de l'UMP* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007).
2. These figures include, on the mainstream right, the vote for splinter Gaullist candidates, and on the left, for the candidate from the PCF, a party of government under the terms of the common program contracted with the PS in 1972, of the left-wing radicals, and (in 1988) of the Greens.
3. See George Ross, "Monetary Integration and the French Model," in *Euros and Europeans: Monetary Integration and the European Model of Society*, ed. A. Martin and G. Ross (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 80–88.
4. Céline Bélot and Bruno Cautrès, "L'Europe, invisible mais omniprésente," in *Le nouveau désordre électoral. Les leçons du 21 avril 2002*, ed. N. Mayer and B. Cautrès (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2004), 119–41.
5. See Pew Research Center, *The New Sick Man of Europe: The European Union—French Dispirited; Attitudes Diverge Sharply from Germans*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/05/Pew-Research-Center-Global-Attitudes-Project-European-Union-Report-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-May-13-2013.pdf>