

France's Left Turn: Mapping the 2012 Elections

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In 2012 the Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate, François Hollande, defeated the incumbent, Nicolas Sarkozy. The victory was convincing, though not overwhelming. Hollande thus became only the second Socialist president of the Fifth Republic after François Mitterrand. Hollande's success in the presidential contest was reinforced a few weeks later when the PS and immediate allies won an absolute majority of seats in the parliamentary election. The articles in this special issue explore many of the key aspects of both 2012 campaigns: from understanding how Sarkozy could fall so rapidly from grace to examining the extent to which the outcome symbolises a new direction for France, both domestically and internationally.

After many years in the political wilderness, the left enjoyed a spectacular resurgence in 2012. The victory of François Hollande in the presidential election was the first for the left since 1988, making Hollande only the second Socialist president of the Fifth Republic after François Mitterrand. Hollande's success was reinforced when the Socialists won an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly two months later, ten years after Lionel Jospin's 'plural left' government was evicted from power. The scale of the left-wing victory, in a country which more frequently leans to the right, makes 2012 one of the most remarkable and fascinating elections for scholars of French politics. From understanding how Nicolas Sarkozy could fall so rapidly from grace to examining the extent to which the outcome symbolises a new direction for France, the articles in this special issue explore the key facets of the 2012 campaign.

This introductory article provides an overview of the core highlights of both the presidential and parliamentary elections. As such, it provides a complement to the next article in this volume, by Alistair Cole, which places these elections in their broader historical and institutional contexts. The presidential election swung between the widely predicted (a victory for the left) and the unexpected (the dramatic exit of Dominique Strauss-Kahn in the Socialist primary; the

resurgence of Sarkozy towards the end of the campaign). Two central explanations lie at the core of Hollande's victory: the deep-rooted unpopularity of Sarkozy and the fragile state of the French economy. Although Sarkozy was recognised as having shown international leadership on economic issues, his inability to turn the crisis around made him the most recent political casualty of the global economic downturn. This volume also considers the significance of Marine Le Pen, the enigmatic new leader of the far-right Front National (FN) who led her party to its highest ever score in a presidential contest.

The constitutional revision of France's electoral calendar in 2000 ensured that the parliamentary election now follows the presidential election in close succession. The aim was to ensure that the president would enjoy a parliamentary majority, thus bringing to an end the stalemate created by 'cohabitation', when the president and prime minister were from different parties. A side effect of the new electoral calendar is to reduce the visibility and import of the parliamentary contest, with Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* (2011) arguing that this is now effectively a second-order election. However, its significance should not be dismissed entirely. Parliament still has symbolic importance in France, and two important developments took place in 2012. For the first time, 11 deputies were elected by French expatriates, thus challenging traditional geographical conceptions of representation. Meanwhile, France took another big step towards gender parity, with its first ever gender-balanced government and another 50% rise in the number of female deputies elected.

1. The long campaign

The presidential election was held on 22 April (first round) and 6 May (second round), with the two rounds of the parliamentary contest on 10 and 17 June respectively. It is little wonder that voters were experiencing election fatigue by the final ballot, especially when it is borne in mind that the election campaign actually began long before 2012. Hollande (along with the ill-fated 2007 candidate, Ségolène Royal) declared himself a candidate in the Socialist primary as early as 2010. Meanwhile, Sarkozy's prospects of re-election were the subject of speculation for almost the entire duration of his five-year presidency. Within the first year of his term of office, Sarkozy's popularity ratings had taken a slump from which they never fully recovered. While the economic crisis certainly did not ameliorate Sarkozy's standing with French voters, it is not a sufficient explanation as to why the incumbent candidate was unable to secure his own re-election.

Andrew Knapp's article helps to unravel the paradoxes underpinning the Sarkozy presidency. Sarkozy has always been a striking and unusual personality in French politics; his dynamism and energy, combined with his outspoken

nature and his willingness to pursue unpopular decisions, meant that he was already a divisive figure before he was first elected in 2007. Indeed, one of the features of the 2007 election was the mounting of a campaign aimed to elect *'tout sauf Sarkozy'* ('anyone but Sarkozy'). Once Sarkozy became president, his perceived vulgarity and ability to offend people sat in striking contrast with popular conceptions of how a president should behave. His unconventional path into politics—he eschewed the traditional political breeding ground of the National School of Administration (ENA)—betrayed itself through a lack of refinement and presidential stature. He abandoned his claim during the 2007 election campaign that he would spend a few days post-election engaging in quiet reflection in a monastery, instead deciding to celebrate his victory with flashy (and, to the French, vulgar) displays of wealth. The images of his celebratory dinner in the fashionable restaurant Fouquet's on the Champs-Élysées on the night of his victory, followed by a few days living it up on a wealthy friend's yacht, were to haunt him for the rest of his presidency.

Sarkozy's personal life also dominated media headlines in a way that was unprecedented and (to many) unseemly. His marriage to his second wife, Cécilia, collapsed within months of his entering office, and was followed by a rapid and public courtship of the former model Carla Bruni. His image was further tarnished by such episodes as his 2008 expletive-laden outburst towards a member of the public who refused to shake his hand: *'Casse-toi, pauv' con'* ('Get lost, asshole'). Collectively, the image was formed of a 'bling-bling' president, a man who lacked the grace and dignity befitting the French head of state (Nay, 2012).

The much maligned persona of Sarkozy provided the perfect opportunity for Hollande to make a virtue of his own rather bland image. Against another opponent, Hollande might have appeared rather dull, uninspiring and inexperienced (he had served previously as a deputy and as the Socialist Party (PS) leader, but had never held ministerial office). As first secretary of the PS, he had acquired the reputation of a consensus-seeking party manager rather than a strong leader. In particular, his mis-management of the 2005 EU referendum campaign, in which his support for the 'Yes' vote was rejected by some leading party figures as well as the majority of the electorate, damaged his leadership credentials. However, public rejection of the 'hyperpresident' enabled Hollande to create the winning persona of 'Mr Normal'—a steady hand who lacked the flashy exuberance of Sarkozy that the French found so grating. Hollande sought to keep his personal affairs as private as possible, while remaining calm and authoritative at all times. He was also able to build on his more classical political background, including an education at both the Political Science Institute in Paris and the ENA (Raffy, 2011). His emphasis on the negative aspects of Sarkozy's record, combined

with a mantra for change (his slogan was ‘*Le changement c’est maintenant*’—‘time for change’), reinforced his image as the anti-Sarkozy candidate. As a result, much of the support for Hollande can be interpreted as a rejection of Sarkozy rather than a positive endorsement of Hollande (Barotte and Schuck, 2012; *Présidoscopie*, 2012).

While Hollande’s contrast with Sarkozy served him well, his weak image as a leader meant that he was not originally considered as a strong contender prior to the Socialist primary. Instead, the front-runner for many months was Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK). DSK had previously served as finance minister, and was nominated by Sarkozy in 2007 to be the new head of the International Monetary Fund. This position prevented DSK from officially declaring himself a candidate in the Socialist primary, but did not prevent pollsters from including him in their list of possible candidates. In all the pre-election polls, DSK had a clear lead over the other Socialists in the primary, and was also projected to be the Socialist candidate who would defeat Sarkozy most convincingly in the second round (*Le Monde with AFP and Reuters*, 2012). The sudden and dramatic exit of DSK from contention was therefore one of the biggest upsets of recent French political history. In May 2011, Strauss-Kahn was accused of attempting to rape a chambermaid in a hotel in New York (*Bacqué and Chemin*, 2012). Although the charges were eventually dropped, DSK has since been embroiled in further sexual scandals, and in any event, the damage was done as far as his presidential aspirations were concerned: his campaign was effectively over before it had officially begun. The Socialist primary thus went from a foregone conclusion in favour of Strauss-Kahn to being a much more open contest. The then party leader, Martine Aubry, was liberated from her agreement with DSK not to stand against him in the presidential primary, and she and Hollande emerged as the new frontrunners in the polls. The four candidates eliminated after the first round of the primary on 9 October (including Hollande’s former partner, Royal) all threw their weight behind Hollande in the second round a week later, leading to his comfortable victory.

On the right, Sarkozy was spared the fratricidal battles that have previously haunted presidential campaigns (with two strong right-wing candidates opposing each other in 1974, 1981, 1988 and 1995). Two ambitious heavyweights—the prime minister, François Fillon, and the party general secretary, Jean-François Copé—held their fire for 2017, while potential campaigns by Dominique de Villepin (former prime minister) and Jean-Louis Borloo (ex-minister and Radical party leader) failed to get off the ground. Sarkozy therefore enjoyed the luxury of being the only candidate of the mainstream right, with his main axes of competition coming from Hollande on the left and Le Pen on the far-right.

2. The presidential election

In total, ten candidates contested the first round of the presidential election. Four of these candidates represented marginal political movements and each garnered less than 2% of the vote (see Table 1 for first-round results). The remaining six candidates included Sarkozy, Hollande, Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, François Bayrou and Eva Joly. Mélenchon was a former Socialist who had moved further to the left, and was very successful in filling the void left by the Communist Party and the charismatic Olivier Besancenot, who had obtained 4.25% of the vote in 2007 as leader of the Communist Revolutionary League. Under the umbrella party 'Left Front' (Front de gauche), Mélenchon's goals were two-fold: to defeat his arch-nemesis, Le Pen, and to force Hollande to shift his policies further to the left. Despite quite a successful campaign in terms of media coverage, Mélenchon was largely unsuccessful in both his goals. The gulf between Le Pen and himself ended up being rather wider than projected in the polls, and he did not pose a sufficient threat to Hollande to force the latter to shift too far away from a moderate discourse. However, Hollande did make a few gestures towards the far-left, including the promise to introduce a new tax rate of 75% for those earning more than 1 million euros per year—a policy that raised plenty of eyebrows internationally.

Bayrou, a centrist candidate, hoped to repeat his strong performance of 2007, when he had obtained 18.6% of the vote and emerged as the 'third man' of the election. However, his score halved in 2012 and his influence underwent an even sharper decline, as his fifth placement reduced the importance of his

Table 1. First-round results of the 2012 presidential election

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

Source: French Constitutional Council (www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/).

support in the second round. His final decision to declare his support for Hollande was to cost him dear: the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) responded by putting up a candidate against Bayrou in the parliamentary election. The PS refused to instruct its own candidate to stand down in a gesture of solidarity, and as a result Bayrou lost his parliamentary seat. A disappointing outcome was also in store for the Green candidate, Eva Joly, who obtained only 2.3% of the vote.

Unsurprisingly, one of the central issues of the election campaign was the economy. The article by Richard Nadeau and Michael Lewis-Beck highlights the vital role that economic variables played in determining the electoral outcome. While long-term factors such as ideology still have some influence, short-term variables such as unemployment were the key determinants in Sarkozy's defeat. In this respect, Sarkozy was just the latest victim of a global trend for evicting incumbents that has emerged since the start of the economic crisis in 2008 (Caramani *et al.*, 2011, 2012). However, the article by Vincent Tiberj reveals that values still play an important role alongside the economy, with decisions to vote left or right being shaped by the liberal-authoritarian as well as the economic left-right scale. Overall, voters were most likely to support a candidate who shared both their economic and social values, with vote choice being hardest to predict amongst voters who were socially liberal but economically conservative or vice-versa. Nonetheless, as the article by Elvire Guillaud and Nicolas Sauger illustrates, voters were fairly consistent in their attitudes towards taxation and spending, with their electoral preferences being shaped accordingly. Sarkozy and Hollande offered two differing visions of how to emerge from the economic crisis. Sarkozy's model, in keeping with the policies of many other right-wing parties, was to introduce austerity measures in order to reduce public spending and focus on deficit reduction. In contrast, Hollande proposed stimulating the economy in order to promote economic growth.

Ben Clift's article illuminates the contrasting economic policies of the two front-runners in more depth. He also places the economic debates within the broader European context, and highlights the distinctive features of Hollande's campaign in this regard. Helen Drake's article expands upon the theme of Europe, which was at the same time central and marginal to the campaign. Sarkozy had invested heavily in his role as a European leader; he had taken a lead negotiating role in the Chechen crisis of 2008, when France held the EU presidency, and had since formed such a close political duo with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel that the two had earned the moniker 'Merkozy'. Their combined efforts to resolve the eurozone crisis ensured a prominent and central role for France on the European stage and afforded a more positive image to Sarkozy. Thus, the eurozone and its implications for the domestic economy featured prominently in the campaign.

However, wider issues pertaining to European integration continued to be submerged by national issues.

Alongside the core theme of the economy, various other election themes emerged, including education, law and order and social integration. Each candidate sought to ensure that their own preferred themes dominated the news agenda. Raymond Kuhn's article illustrates the dominance of television as the medium of political information for the mass electorate during the campaign, but also stresses the important role played by the internet in mobilising committed and potential supporters. Televised interviews and debates were central to informing the public about the issues and candidates. The carefully managed news cycles were, however, momentarily thrown off balance when an unexpected story exploded in March 2012, five weeks before voters went to the polls. A lone gunman, Mohammed Merah, went on a shooting spree, killing three soldiers and then going to a Jewish primary school and executing a teacher and three young children. The brutal and barbaric nature of the shootings left the country in shock. Sarkozy handled the affair with dignity, suspending his campaign and readopting the presidential mantle that, for once, befitted him. Hollande and the other candidates were left in an awkward position; they needed to be seen to respect the national sense of grief without exploiting the situation, and their presence at the funerals of the victims seemed rather inappropriate. Le Pen initially maintained a careful silence, lest the gunman turn out to be a right-wing fanatic like the Norwegian killer, Anders Breivik. Once it transpired that the gunman was in fact a French citizen with Algerian origins, Le Pen found herself back on comfortable turf, using the shootings to shift the political agenda on to her preferred predilections of immigration and law and order. However, while the affair was one of the most dramatic moments of the campaign, it gave neither Sarkozy nor Le Pen the boost in the polls that some commentators had predicted.

Even though Le Pen gained only marginal benefit from the Merah story, she remained one of the key figures of the 2012 election campaign. She had inherited the FN leadership from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2011 (Fourest and Venner, 2011). As a much younger candidate, and a woman in a male-dominated party, she was able to project a more inclusive and less abrasive image of her party. Her strategy of 'decontamination' of the party did not prevent her from campaigning on many of the issues dear to the far-right, including law and order, immigration and exit from the euro. Nonna Mayer's article identifies the different ways in which Le Pen was able to tap into a variety of electoral markets. In particular, she was far more successful than her father had been in attracting women voters. Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN electorate had been predominantly masculine, with women comprising only a third of FN voters in some elections (Shields, 2004; Sineau, 2008, p. 66). Marine Le Pen managed to bring support

from women up to within a couple of percentage points of male support levels, and this shift was instrumental in securing her very strong third place in the first round. The article by James Shields provides further insights into the electoral appeal of Le Pen and the consequences of a resurgent far-right for the parties of the mainstream right. The tension between the mainstream and far-right parties was most starkly illuminated during the parliamentary contest, but the dilemma posed for Sarkozy by Le Pen's strong campaign was also one of the dominant features of the presidential election.

Le Pen may actually have benefited from Sarkozy's attempts to win over some of the FN's voters by shifting his own campaign closer and closer to the FN's turf. This move rightwards by Sarkozy served to normalise the discourse of the far-right and ensure that the FN's preferred issues remained prominent on the campaign agenda. Sarkozy's increasingly radical proposals for controlling immigration were a desperate bid to attract FN support in the second round of the election, as well as to encourage as many FN sympathisers as possible to vote for him in the first round. Certain polls circulating in 2011 had Le Pen qualifying for the second round at the expense of Sarkozy, in a bizarre twist on the 2002 result, when her father had qualified for the second round at the expense of the left-wing candidate, Lionel Jospin. By 2012, Sarkozy had overtaken Le Pen as the more likely second-round candidate, but he was still at risk of qualifying behind Hollande in the first round. The race to be the top qualifier was symbolically important; although Hollande was long projected to win the second round, his victory depended on the transfer of support from the other left-wing candidates in the first round, including Mélenchon and Joly. As Sarkozy had no other candidates competing with him on the mainstream right, he had no natural secondary electoral base upon which to build in the second round, and so allowing Hollande to be ahead of him in the first round would be a sign of real weakness. Ultimately, however, Sarkozy did face the humiliation of qualifying for the second round nearly two percentage points behind Hollande. He was therefore heavily dependent on support from Le Pen's voters in the second round. However, that support was not exactly forthcoming; Le Pen herself announced that she would abstain and encouraged her voters to do likewise. Although Sarkozy was ideologically closer to the FN than was Hollande, Le Pen hoped to see Sarkozy suffer a humiliating defeat in the presidential election, as this would then weaken the UMP in the parliamentary contest and afford greater opportunities for FN candidates. Sarkozy's sharp shift rightwards also cost him the support of more moderate voters; as noted above, Bayrou decided to lend his support to Hollande, on the grounds that Sarkozy's pursuit of the far-right had led to an 'obsession with immigration and with borders' and had resulted in Sarkozy's adopting a 'violent position that contradicts our values—both mine and those of Gaullism' (Jaxel-Truer, 2012).

The electorates of the different candidates in the first round were broadly in keeping with traditional patterns of electoral behaviour in France. Women were more likely than men to support both Hollande and Sarkozy, while men supported Mélenchon and Le Pen in greater numbers than women, reflecting the tendency both in France and elsewhere for women to favour the mainstream over the political margins—although, as noted above, the gender gap in the FN electorate narrowed in 2012 (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Sineau, 2008). Sarkozy maintained his advantage among the older age groups, although Hollande garnered fewer voters from the youngest age category (18–24 years old) than Royal had done five years previously. Hollande and Sarkozy both drew votes from the middle classes; Hollande was more popular with the liberal professions, while Sarkozy attracted managers and business owners. Meanwhile, Le Pen and Mélenchon fought over the votes of the disaffected working and lower-middle classes. Le Pen scored well among a variety of social and professional categories, with the notable exception of highly educated groups and liberal professions. Her greater success among the socioeconomic groups that were also targeted by Mélenchon helps to explain her much better result. Indeed, Le Pen's score of 17.9% was the highest score ever obtained by an FN candidate in a presidential election.

In contrast to the excitement and drama of the first round, the second round of the presidential election was rather more subdued. The key event was the televised debate between the two frontrunners that took place on 2 May. Sarkozy adopted an attacking stance, while Hollande carefully deflected the many blows sent his way and occasionally threw a punch back. Sarkozy was able to belittle Hollande's lack of experience and came across as more knowledgeable, but dwelling on his five years in office was not always a winning strategy given the high levels of public dissatisfaction with his track record. Hollande closed the debate with a memorable, carefully prepared speech where he repeated the phrase 'As president of the Republic, I would . . .'¹ no fewer than fifteen times (Lemarié, 2012). The anaphora was grating to some, but it did provide the opportunity for Hollande to set out how his presidency would be different to Sarkozy's on all the areas where Sarkozy had been disappointing or divisive. Neither candidate emerged the clear victor in the debate. Hollande subsequently benefited from the half-hearted support of Bayrou, who declared his own intention to vote for Hollande but did not go so far as to instruct his supporters to do likewise (and many of them did not). However, Sarkozy did succeed in further narrowing the gap between himself and Hollande. Hollande had once enjoyed a more than ten-point lead over Sarkozy; in the end, this had dwindled to fewer than two points. Indeed, if Sarkozy had had a couple more weeks to benefit from his upward trajectory, it is

¹'Moi, président de la République . . . ?'

possible that he might ultimately have succeeded in reversing the gap. The final results are in Table 2, which also reveals that turnout was high in the second round, as it had been in the first.

3. The parliamentary election

After the high drama of the presidential election, the parliamentary election struggled to garner the same sustained interest from a population suffering from election fatigue. The left, buoyant from Hollande's victory, were at little risk of failing to secure a parliamentary majority to support the new president; the key issue was whether the PS would be able to secure an absolute majority by itself, or whether it would require the support of coalition partners such as the Greens (EELV) and the Left Radical Party (PRG). Both parties had already received positions within Hollande's first government: Christiane Taubira (PRG) became the highest-ranked woman in the government, and the only woman to obtain one of the most senior roles, when she was nominated to Justice Minister. Meanwhile, Cécile Duflot, leader of the EELV, became the new Minister for Housing and the Regions. The new government was led by Jean-Marc Ayrault, a loyalist who had never held ministerial office. The choice of Ayrault over Aubry as prime minister led the latter to decline any other ministerial position.

Despite Aubry's omission from the new government, it is of note that Hollande honoured his campaign promise to appoint a parity government, with women occupying an equal number of positions in both the cabinet and the government as a whole. However, Rainbow Murray's article points out that this numerical equality did not translate into an equality of power, with many of the most prominent positions going to men. Key roles went to senior Socialists such as the former prime minister, Laurent Fabius (Minister of Foreign Affairs); Hollande's campaign director of communication, Manuel Valls (Interior); and his campaign chief, Pierre Moscovici (Finance). Murray also discusses

Table 2. Second-round results of the 2012 presidential election

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

Source: French Constitutional Council (www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/).

the impact of the newly reinforced parity legislation on the number of women elected to the National Assembly. Disappointingly, the proportion of women candidates actually went down in 2012 to 40%, compared with 41.6% in 2007. Both the Socialists and the UMP fielded fewer women candidates than they had done in the previous election. Unlike the UMP, the PS did at least improve its score for the proportion of women elected, which was the main reason why women's representation in parliament increased from 18.5% in 2007 to 26.9% in 2012.

The UMP's shortage of women candidates had heavy financial repercussions for the party, but this was only one of many problems facing the party during the elections. The defeat and subsequent withdrawal from politics of Sarkozy had left the party with a leadership vacuum, similar to that faced by the PS in 2002 after Jospin's elimination in the first round of the presidential election. Both Fillon and Copé aspired to become the next party leader, but a divisive leadership campaign had to be avoided at all costs while the party was still in election mode. The party had also been a vocal opponent of cohabitation, and had supported the changes to the electoral calendar in 2002. However, the UMP now found itself in a position of unprecedented precarity. A decade in opposition had allowed the PS to rebuild its local support base, with the PS now dominant in local and regional politics across the country. The Socialists had also gained a majority in the Senate for the first time in 2011, overturning this traditional bastion of the right. With the PS now holding the presidency and poised to gain a parliamentary majority, the UMP were reduced to making the plea that 'we can't let them have all the powers' (Leparmentier and Schneider, 2012). The Socialists retorted that the UMP had never objected to a concentration of power when it was the right who had been the beneficiary.

The UMP also faced the difficult decision of how best to handle the threat posed by the FN. Although the far-right never does as well in the parliamentary elections, due in part to the single-member plurality electoral system, the FN still had the potential to be a real nuisance for the UMP. In constituencies where Le Pen had scored highly in the presidential election, there was a genuine threat that the FN could qualify for the second round alongside, or even at the expense of, the UMP candidate. This might lead to a splitting of the broad right-wing vote and the election of the left-wing candidate. Without clear leadership, the UMP had no agreed party strategy on how to react to this threat. In some cases, the UMP candidate made more or less explicit overtures towards the FN, either through supporting their candidate or, as in the case of the former minister Nadine Morano, trying to highlight the shared values between the parties in a desperate appeal to win over FN voters. The PS was more likely to adopt the traditional French 'Republican' position of supporting whichever candidate was most likely to defeat the FN in the second round, even if this meant standing down their own candidate in order to avoid splitting the

non-Frontist vote. On occasion, the UMP did the same, although at the discretion of the individual candidate.

Hénin-Beaumont, home constituency to Le Pen, became the most high-profile constituency in the country after Mélenchon decided to replay his presidential battle against the FN leader at the parliamentary level. Mélenchon again failed to beat his nemesis, but may have taken some comfort from the fact that she was narrowly defeated in the second round by the fairly anonymous Socialist candidate, with only 118 votes deciding the final outcome. Had the UMP candidate not had the magnanimity to call on his voters to back the PS candidate, Le Pen would in all likelihood have entered parliament. In her stead, two other members of the FN clan took up seats in parliament, the first time that the FN had won seats since 1993. One, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, was the niece of Marine (and grand-daughter of Jean-Marie) Le Pen, and was also the youngest deputy of the new parliamentary cohort at the age of just 22. The article by James Shields sheds further light on the repercussions of the FN's re-entry into parliament.

Another unique feature of the parliamentary election was the creation, through a controversial programme of electoral redistricting, of 11 new seats to represent France's many expatriates. Unlike the seats representing France's overseas territories and departments, these new seats explicitly targeted French citizens living in other polities. The 11 constituencies cover the entire world, and posed many administrative headaches. These ranged from the logistical difficulties of organising an election across such a large and diverse geographical area to the normative issues raised about formal representation for those domiciled beyond the reach of French law. Susan Collard's article examines the motivations for introducing these new constituencies and the extent to which the experiment backfired due to very low turnout.

The other big story of the parliamentary election took place between the first and second rounds, when Hollande's partner, Valérie Trierweiler, sent an embarrassing tweet that contradicted the new president's officially stated position. Even worse, the tweet was founded on a personal rivalry, as it concerned the parliamentary contest between Royal—Hollande's former partner and mother of his four children—and a male Socialist contender, Olivier Falorni, who was running against Royal as a dissident candidate. Seeing that Royal's election prospects were threatened, Hollande publicly supported her campaign, only for Trierweiler to tweet her support for Falorni shortly thereafter. The full repercussions of this affair are discussed in Rainbow Murray's article; the consequence was to cause great embarrassment for Hollande. The public airing of his dirty laundry went wholly against his carefully constructed image as 'Mr Normal', and smacked entirely of the mediatisation of private affairs that had been so costly for Sarkozy. Stories raged about the jealous rivalries between Royal and Trierweiler, with

Hollande portrayed as the hapless man stood between two strong women (Cabana and Rosencher, 2012).

What of the final outcome? The PS did, in the end, secure an absolute majority in parliament without needing to rely on the cooperation of any other parties (see Table 3 for second-round results). The UMP suffered a crushing defeat; some ministers, such as Natalie Kosciusko-Morizet, managed to defend their seats successfully against the odds, but many did not. Notable exits from parliament included Claude Guéant, the outgoing Minister of the Interior, and Frédéric Lefebvre, one of many UMP casualties in the new expatriate constituencies. The UMP did not have a monopoly on high-profile defeats, however; other notable losers included Bayrou, Le Pen, Royal and the former Socialist Culture Minister in the Mitterrand years, Jack Lang. The Greens benefited from their pre-electoral pact with the PS, increasing their parliamentary contingent from 4 to 17. Meanwhile, the Front de gauche obtained a disappointing result, maintaining the long-term decline of the far-left in France.

Two final points are worthy of note. First, the 2012 contest continued the long-term trend towards increasing abstentionism in parliamentary elections, with the turnout reaching a record low level of 55.4% in the second round. Table 4 illustrates how the general downward trend has been exacerbated by the 'second-order' effect and voter fatigue created by the reversal of the electoral calendar in 2002. Second, 2012 witnessed the entry of six new ethnic minority deputies into the National Assembly, taking the total number from just one to seven.

Table 3. Second-round results of the 2012 parliamentary election

Parties	Votes	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Front de gauche	249,498	1.08	10
Socialist	9,420,889	40.91	280
Left Radical	538,331	2.34	12
Other Left	709,395	3.08	22
Europe-Ecologie-Les Verts	829,036	3.60	17
Regionalist	135,312	0.59	2
Modem	113,196	0.49	2
Centrist Alliance	123,132	0.53	2
Radical Party	311,199	1.35	6
Nouveau Centre	568,319	2.47	12
UMP	8,740,628	37.95	194
Other Right	417,940	1.81	15
Front National	842,695	3.66	2
Other extreme-right	29,738	0.13	1

Electorate = 43,233,648; votes = 23,952,486 (55.40% of registered voters); abstentions = 19,281,162 (44.60%); spoiled ballots = 923,178 (2.14%); valid votes = 23,029,308 (53.27%).

Source: French Ministry of the Interior (www.interieur.gouv.fr/)

Table 4. Level of turnout in second round of parliamentary elections 1973–2012 (as percentage of registered electorate)

1973	81.89	1993	67.56
1978	84.66	1997	71.52
1981	74.46	2002	60.32
1986	One round only	2007	59.98
1988	69.89	2012	55.40

All seven were elected on the left, demonstrating that the left leads on the issue of diversity as well as gender equality. However, although this symbolic first step towards a more diverse parliament is to be welcomed, the overwhelmingly white representation in the National Assembly still stands in stark contrast to the diverse and multi-ethnic composition of the French population.

4. Conclusion

The French elections of 2012 were a turning point in French politics. The Socialists regained control of both the Elysée² and the National Assembly after a long spell in opposition. The defeat of the unpopular incumbent Sarkozy, although more narrow than predicted, left the UMP in disarray. Their challenge over the next five years will be to appoint a new leader who can hold the party together and transform them back into a fighting machine in time for the 2017 elections. The 2012 elections witnessed a resurgence not only of the left but also of the far-right, rejuvenated by the leadership of Marine Le Pen. Meanwhile, the future of the far-left continues to look uncertain, despite the relatively strong performance of Mélenchon.

Parliament has become diversified in numerous ways, including a rise in the presence of women and ethnic minorities, and the inclusion of 11 new deputies from non-French territories. However, the low levels of turnout and the declining interest in parliamentary elections undermine the validity of parliament as an institution. With single parties on both left and right demonstrating the ability to provide a full parliamentary majority for their president, the days of the 'bipolar quadrille'³ are truly over. The strength of the political centre has eroded significantly since 2007. The new party system is now founded on two strong parties of the centre-left and centre-right, whose Downsian tendencies are disrupted

²The official residence of the president.

³This was the name given to the French party system in the 1980s, when the bipolar tendency of left and right was split across four main parties (the Socialists and Communists on the one side; the Gaullists (RPR) and the non-Gaullist right (UDF) on the other).

by the centrifugal influences of the far-left and far-right (Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976). The fragile and constantly evolving nature of the French party system means that the new status quo may shift again by 2017, as the UMP regroupes and decides whether to continue steering itself towards the far-right or back towards the political centre.

The articles collected in this special issue enable the reader to place this election within its wider context. Beyond the drama of an individual election, some trends in voter behaviour are quite stable, while attempts to predict and explain electoral outcomes are becoming ever more refined. The personalities of the campaign are explored in depth, from the torturous downfall of Sarkozy to the renaissance of the FN under Marine Le Pen, via the election of a candidate who based his campaign on being 'ordinary' (in French, 'normal'). The dominant issue of the economy is considered not only in terms of its impact on the electoral outcome, but also in the way that Hollande might now steer France in a new direction. The less visible, yet still highly salient, issue of Europe was also a theme underpinning the election. Alongside elements of stability and continuity, 2012 also introduced some aspects of change. For instance, the feminisation of French politics, while still far from reaching true parity, took a significant step forward in 2012. Finally, the creation of constituencies for expatriates links to earlier discussions about France's place in the world and its attempts to maintain a French presence and visibility within an increasingly globalised society. With France remaining one of the leading players on the European and world stages, the outcome of the 2012 elections will undoubtedly be felt far beyond France's borders.

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