

Towards Parity Democracy? Gender in the 2012 French Legislative Elections

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The victory of the Left in 2012, and the application of reinforced parity legislation, led to significant gains for women in French politics, with 27% women in parliament and 50% in government, including a powerful Women's Minister. However, a poor performance by the Right, and the concentration of women in less powerful positions, indicate that the battle for equality is not yet won. Ségolène Royal's bid to become France's first female Speaker also ended in drama and failure. Promises to remove all state funding for parties who do not respect parity in the future could be the most important outcome for women of this election.

1. Introduction

The French 'parity' law, introduced in 2000, has never come close to fulfilling its constitutional goal of promoting equal access of men and women into politics. It has not even met the legal requirement of an equal number of male and female candidates for parliamentary seats. In 2002, the first time the law was applied, the total percentage of women candidates was 38.9%, rising to 41.6% in 2007. Many of these women were fielded in unwinnable seats, meaning that the total proportions of women elected were even further removed from parity. In 1997, women filled 10.9% of seats in the National Assembly; this rose to only 12.3% in 2002, and 18.5% in 2007.

However, there were some grounds for optimism in 2012. The first was that the law was strengthened, thus making it more costly for parties to ignore parity completely; the second was the anticipated victory of the left. Parties of the left, in France as elsewhere, have a much stronger track record for women's representation (Caul, 1999, 2001; Kittilson, 2006; Opello, 2006; Sineau, 2008). To some extent, 2012 did provide the expected surge in women's representation, with the proportion of women deputies rising to 26.9%. This result appears to be

much more the product of a left-wing victory than of tightened parity legislation; parties of the right continue to drag their heels in this regard.

Although women remain a numerical minority in French politics, they dominated many of the headlines of the legislative campaign. Early in the campaign, former justice minister Rachida Dati ruffled feathers on the right by refusing to cede her seat to the outgoing Prime Minister, François Fillon. She became an emblem of the difficulties right-wing women faced in securing their party's nomination. On the left, former presidential candidate Ségolène Royal embarked on a controversial bid to become the first female president of the French National Assembly. Her bitter contest against a male dissident candidate eventually produced the biggest news story of the legislative elections, when political rivalries became intertwined with personal jealousies at the highest levels of politics.

Alongside a boost in parliamentary representation, French women achieved a significant victory when newly elected president, François Hollande, honoured his promise to have a parity government, including an equal number of women and men in cabinet posts. This was a hugely symbolic breakthrough, especially given previous disappointing attempts to improve women's presence at the executive level. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the portfolios given to the new government reveals ongoing inequalities, with gender stereotyping appearing to influence portfolio allocation, and the most powerful positions remaining almost exclusively the preserve of men.

This article places the events of 2012 within the wider context of women's representation in French politics and internationally. The parity law, unlike many other gender quotas, continues to produce incremental rather than fast-tracked change in women's representation, although the pace is starting to accelerate (Murray, 2012). There are still many indicators of persistent inequality of treatment for France's female politicians. The longer-term prognosis is becoming increasingly positive, however, especially if Hollande honours his manifesto pledge to withdraw all state funding from parties who refuse to comply with parity legislation in future elections.

2. Grounds for optimism in 2012

There were several early indicators that 2012 would be a good year for women. The first was a strengthening of the parity legislation, passed in 2007 but first applied in 2012. For legislative elections, the law stipulates that parties will lose a proportion of their state funding if they do not field a minimum of 48% candidates of either sex. Parties are funded in two portions: one based on votes, the other based on seats won. Parties who do not respect parity lose funding from the first portion. This requirement has been more binding for small parties with few or no parliamentary seats, as they are wholly dependent on the first portion of

funding. Conversely, large parties gain the bulk of their income from the second portion and can therefore more easily absorb any losses from the first portion. The ironic consequence is that it is precisely the parties with seats in parliament who have the least incentive to implement the law, even though it is these same parties that have the most impact on the gender balance of parliament. In order to reduce the incentive of parties to ignore parity and offset the financial loss, new legislation was introduced that increased by 50% the amount of funding sacrificed. The UMP, who held the majority of seats in the outgoing legislature and who selected only 26.5% women in 2007, had forfeited 3.9 million euros per year under the old rules, out of an annual total of 34.5 million euros of state funding (Laurent, 2012; Léchenet, 2012). Increasing this loss by 50% would make the cost of breaching parity difficult to ignore, especially given that the party was projected to lose seats, and therefore lose some of its income from the second portion of funding. The UMP thus had a rational incentive to increase its proportion of women candidates.

The previous poor performance by the UMP stands in contrast with the parties of the left, who have long been the champions of parity (Opello, 2006; Sineau, 2011). Although the left has been in opposition for the past ten years, the majority of women deputies have represented left-wing parties. Their time in opposition means that the Socialists (PS) have fewer male incumbents to contend with than the UMP. In addition, the traditional practice of reselecting former incumbents (those who had previously held and then lost the seat) was less prevalent now that the party had been out of power for an entire decade (Murray, 2010). Instead, the PS has been able to promote gender parity in the selection of candidates for vacant seats. Although male incumbency remains a problem within the PS's safest seats, it has been able to ensure that more women are selected in target seats.

3. Predicted versus actual results

Despite the positive indications, the total percentage of women candidates in 2012 was 40%, which was actually a decline relative to 2007 (see Table 1).

Although not every party fielded fewer candidates in 2012, the overall downward shift was mirrored by the two largest parties, the Socialists and the UMP. The decline in the number of female Socialist candidates was small but disappointing, as they had claimed to be aiming for full parity (Parti Socialiste, 2012). The decline by the UMP is also surprising, as it entailed a loss of 4 million euros funding per year. This is only slightly more than 2007 in absolute terms, because the UMP received a lower vote share in 2012, so the total funding pool for the party went down. In relative terms, the harsher penalties and lower proportion of female candidates meant that the UMP lost 36.5% of the first

Table 1. Percentage women candidates and elected, 2002–2012

Party	% Women candidates			% Women elected		
	2002	2007	2012	2002	2007	2012
Communists ^a	43.6	46.5	47.8	18.2	16.7	20
Greens ^b	49.8	50.4	49.6	33.3	25	52.9
PS	34.6	45.5	45.3	16.2	26	37.5
MoDem ^c	n/a	36.9	37.1	n/a	0	0
UDF/New Centre ^d	19.9	27.9	32.4	6.9	0	0
UMP	19.6	26.5	25.7	10.7	14.2	13.9
FN ^e	48.4	48.8	48.9	n/a	n/a	50
Total: all parties	38.9	41.6	40.0	12.3	18.5	26.9

Source: Ministère de l'intérieur; Observatoire de la Parité; author's own calculations. Parties are arranged from most left-wing (top) to most right-wing (bottom).

^aThis figure represents the French Communist Party in 2002 and 2007, and the Front de Gauche in 2012.

^bThe Greens only won three seats in 2002 and four seats in 2007.

^cMoDem formed as a new party in 2007 following the split from the UDF.

^dUDF changed its name to New Centre (Nouveau Centre) in 2007.

^eThe FN did not win any seats in 2002 or 2007. Two FN candidates won their seats in 2012: one male and one female.

portion of state funding. This will be particularly painful given that their total funding, taking into account their smaller seat share, declined from 34.5 million to 26.1 million euros in 2012. After incorporating the penalty for non-implementation of parity, this dwindled even further to 22.1 million euros, equating to an additional 15.3% cut. In contrast, the PS lost less than 1 million of its total funding of 30.9 million euros, or about a 3% cut. From now on the PS is significantly richer than the UMP, reversing the position in 2007 (Laurent, 2012).

Even more important than the number of women candidates is the proportion of women who get elected. Herein lies the second weakness of the parity law: it does not prevent the placement of women candidates in unwinnable seats. Previous research (Murray, 2010; Murray *et al.*, 2012) has demonstrated that parties from across the political spectrum tend to place women disproportionately in less winnable seats. As a result, the proportion of women candidates has always exceeded the proportion of women elected, usually by a considerable margin, even among those parties who win many seats. In 2012, only two parties achieved gender parity in their parliamentary delegation: the Greens and the FN. The success of the Greens reflects their long-term commitment to gender parity, and a generous pre-electoral pact with the Socialists enabled a much higher number of Green deputies¹ to be elected in 2012. The success of the FN is

¹Eighteen Green deputies won seats. One, Cécile Duflot, entered the government and was replaced by a Socialist reserve candidate, so 17 Green deputies entered parliament.

ironic, as they have always been vocal in their opposition to the parity law, but have been compelled to abide by it due to their dependence on the first portion of state funding.

While the PS did not achieve gender parity in their parliamentary delegation, this was never expected, as their outgoing parliamentary group—most of whom sought re-election—was almost three-quarters male. French parties have never been willing to deselect male incumbents, even when they are committed to parity in other respects (Murray, 2010). The Socialists declared before the election that the proportion of women they hoped to see elected would depend on the scale of their victory, as many of these women would be elected in their target seats rather than their safest seats (most of which were being defended by a male incumbent). Their best-case scenario would, in their estimation, have resulted in the election of 40% women. In the end, the electoral outcome was very favourable to the PS, providing enough deputies for them to hold an absolute majority in parliament and govern independently of other left-wing parties. Yet, with 37.5% women deputies, they fell short of their 40% target. One woman who lost against expectations was Ségolène Royal, for reasons detailed later in this article; her case illuminates the internal difficulties in enforcing parity within the party.

The UMP actually saw the proportion of women elected decline, which is disappointing, if not entirely surprising. As explained above, safe seats tend to be the preserve of male incumbents; although some women have inherited these seats when the incumbent retired, most women elected since the introduction of parity have come into parliament through swing seats. The right performed very well in 2002, exceeding expectations, and one consequence was that women were elected in target seats that were not considered very likely to swing to the right. Some of these seats were lost in 2007, and further losses were sustained in 2012, when the total number of seats won by the UMP reduced from 297 to 185. With a disproportionate number of women sat on the electoral front line, in the most vulnerable seats, it was not wholly surprising that the proportion of UMP women declined after the election. The real test for the UMP will be to see whether they are able to improve their performance in 2017. With fewer than half of seats now occupied by male incumbents, the UMP will find it difficult to justify a future repeat of the severe levels of gender disparity witnessed in 2012.

The UMP was not the only party to pull down the overall proportion of women deputies. As in previous years, MoDem (centre) and New Centre (centre-right) failed to elect a single woman between them. As a result, a very clear left–right divide emerges in terms of women’s representation in parliament. According to the *Observatoire de la Parité* (2012), parties of the left had a total of 44.8% women candidates, and 36.7% women elected. In sharp contrast, parties of the

right had fewer women candidates (38.4%), and only 12.8% women elected. Thus, of the two reasons for anticipating more female deputies in 2012, it appears that only the latter (a left-wing victory) made a meaningful difference to the outcome, with the former (an increase to the financial penalties) appearing to have no positive impact.

The difference between the proportion of women candidates and women elected is particularly stark on the right. However, the exact extent to which different parties placed women in unwinnable seats is difficult to determine. Unlike previous years, it is not possible to make a calculation based purely on the swing required to overturn the seat, as significant electoral redistricting took place between 2007 and 2012. An alternative method is to use a measure based on the performance of the presidential candidates within each parliamentary constituency. This method has certain limitations, including its insensitivity to local conditions such as the presence of an incumbent, the parachuting in of a national personality, or the disruptive effects of a three-way race in the second round.² Given these caveats, it is important to think not only about which candidate won the presidential election in a constituency, but also about how close the race was. Table 2 compares seats that were very safe (won by more than 10%), quite safe (between 5 and 10%), vulnerable (between 2 and 5%) and marginal (won by less than 2%), for Sarkozy and Hollande, respectively. The results show that no fewer than 50% of UMP women were placed in the seats where Hollande obtained his best scores (and hence where the UMP had the weakest prospects in the parliamentary election), compared with less than a quarter of male UMP candidates. In almost all other seats, men outnumbered women. This finding was highly statistically significant, confirming the disadvantageous placement of women in unwinnable seats. The picture is slightly less stark for Socialist women, although they outnumber men in all the seats where the UMP had an advantage, while far more men than women (47.7% compared with 29.7%) occupy the seats that are safest for the Socialists. Thus, both parties are still placing men in the more favourable seats, with a disproportionate concentration of women in the least desirable seats.

Additional indications of the uphill battles that women faced include the fact that 268 seats had only male candidates in the second round, thus depriving nearly half of French voters of any opportunity to elect a woman. (Indeed, prior to the 2012 elections, 413 parliamentary constituencies (71.6%) had

²While most second-round legislative contests are a two-horse race between left and right, a third party such as the far-right National Front (FN) may sometimes also qualify, either alongside or at the expense of one of the other parties. On occasion, two candidates from the same side of the political spectrum might qualify; in these cases it is common, but not guaranteed, that the lower placed candidate after the first round will stand down.

Table 2. Placement of UMP and PS legislative candidates by presidential scores

		Sarkozy victory (%)				Hollande victory (%)				Total
		>10	5–10	2–5	<2	>10	5–10	2–5	<2	
UMP	M	24.9	9.2	10.8	5.4	25.2	8.7	9.5	6.2	100
	F	15.8	10.8	4.2	2.5	50.0	5.8	8.3	2.5	100
PS	M	13.3	6.2	7.5	2.9	47.7	7.5	10.8	4.1	100
	F	16.6	8.9	8.6	4.0	29.7	8.6	7.7	6.2	100

Source: author's calculations using second-round presidential election data from www.data.gouv.fr. χ^2 tests reveal that the results for the UMP are highly significant ($p < 0.001$); results for the PS fall just short of significance ($p = 0.056$). M = male, F = female.

never been represented by a woman (Dupont, 2012).) The problem of male incumbency is not a sufficient excuse; 62.7% of deputies elected for the first time in 2012 were men. This represents very limited progress compared with 2007 (when 67% of new deputies were men (Murray, 2009)). Thus, even in seats where a male incumbent did not prevent the election of a woman, men still won the majority of seats. Until parity is achieved among new entrants, there is no hope of coming anywhere close to parity in parliament as a whole. It is also noteworthy that the total number of women qualifying first or second after the first round (364, or 31.5%) is significantly lower than the total proportion of women candidates (40%), even though it exceeds the proportion of women actually elected (26.9%). This is because so many of the 40% women candidates represented small parties who complied with parity out of financial obligation, but did not have any realistic prospect of winning a seat.

One final thing of note when considering the total percentage of women elected is that the composition of parliament changes almost immediately after the election, because parliamentary and executive office are incompatible in France. Although Hollande assembled a government immediately following his election in May, most of his ministers chose to contest the parliamentary elections in order to obtain an autonomous mandate upon which they could fall back if they lost their ministerial position in a future reshuffle.³ To reduce the need for by-elections, all deputies are elected on a ticket which includes a reserve candidate (suppléant) who takes up the seat if the main candidate vacates the seat for reasons such as nomination to the government. In previous elections, anticipation of which deputies would vacate their seats for government posts resulted

³Hollande warned that no minister would be allowed to retain their position if they lost their parliamentary election, thus deterring some ministers from contesting the elections; all those who did were successful.

in a skewed sex distribution of suppléants, whereby the total proportion of women suppléantes (30% in 2002; 38% in 2007) was not mirrored by the proportion of women entering parliament following the nomination of the first post-election government (16.7% in 2002; 17.6% in 2007). Although acting as a suppléant can provide a useful entry into parliament, the most likely beneficiaries of this route have tended to be men, whereas women have been more likely to serve in the subordinate role on the party ticket, gaining entry to parliament only under uncertain and difficult circumstances such as the death of the deputy.

In 2012 this trend continued, with a reduction in the total number of women in parliament following the nomination of the government, even though 45% of UMP suppléants and 41% of PS suppléants were women. Of 11 female deputies taking up ministerial posts, 9 were replaced by men and 2 by women. Conversely, only 7 of the 12 male ministers had a female suppléante, with 5 being replaced by another man. This resulted in a net loss of two women deputies almost immediately after the election, bringing the total number of women down to 153, or 26.5%. This revised figure took France to 38th place in international league tables for women's representation—a significant improvement from their former ranking (84th), but still a rather poor performance for a country that considers itself to be a pioneer of democracy.

4. Women in the headlines

High-profile women dominated some of the biggest campaign stories of the 2012 legislative elections, on both the right and the left. On the right, it emerged that not a single woman would be elected for the UMP in Paris. At the centre of this story was Rachida Dati, former justice minister and spokesperson for Sarkozy's presidential campaign in 2007. She is a mayor of the seventh arrondissement of Paris and, as such, saw herself as the legitimate parliamentary candidate for the same territory.⁴ However, the UMP decided to give the seat to François Fillon, the outgoing prime minister, who was parachuted into the Paris constituency rather than standing for re-election in his original Sarthe constituency, which he had served since 1981. Fillon's interest in switching constituency was partly self-preservation; the Sarthe constituency was more marginal, and the candidate who replaced Fillon was defeated by a Socialist member of the incoming government, Stéphane le Foll. However, Fillon had successfully defended his Sarthe seat during previous Socialist victories, and would likely have succeeded again. A more probable explanation is Fillon's future ambitions. He is likely to become the next leader of the UMP. It is expected that he will then run in the

⁴Combining local and national office in this way is extremely common practice in France, and strong local implantation is seen as a source of legitimacy when running for parliament.

2014 municipal elections with the goal of becoming mayor of Paris. If he succeeds, he will be well placed to become the party's presidential nominee in 2017. These ambitions were given primacy over those of Dati.

Similar events occurred in other Paris constituencies, with six seats being the object of intra-party rivalries, including three where a woman stood as a dissident candidate against the male nominee. In Paris 4, Brigitte Kuster—also a mayor within the constituency—stood against Bernard Debré, who was briefly a minister in 1994–5. In Paris 5, Khedidja Bencherif, a local councillor, tried to claim the seat against the official candidate. In all cases, the women candidates had a legitimate claim to the seat, but all eventually renounced their claims to the seats in order to avoid splitting the UMP vote. Dati and Bencherif gave up their campaigns before the first round of voting, whereas Kuster resigned the party whip in order to contest the first round as an independent candidate, before standing down in the second round. Kuster declared that 'the UMP is an anti-parity party' (Nunès, 2012), and she received public support from Dati and from Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin, one of the most senior women in the UMP and an outspoken feminist.

On 27 June, Rachida Dati issued a press release⁵ announcing that she was creating a network for women elected on the right. One hundred and ten women, including former ministers, deputies, mayors and other local officials, attended the first meeting, and numbers have since expanded. They claimed that 'we need a revolution within the UMP to enforce parity, and we're starting one!'. They suggested that parity should be respected at all levels of decision-making within the party, as well as supporting the Socialist claim that parties who did not respect parity should receive no state funding at all (more on this below). They also spoke of the need for gender equality in other areas such as salaries, education, health and work, declaring, 'we're not ruling anything out. ... We are determined to be heard and to ensure that our propositions are fully taken into consideration'.

It was not only women on the right who grabbed the headlines during the election campaign. Ségolène Royal, the Socialist presidential candidate in 2007, was involved in what became the biggest story of the legislative elections. The drama began after Royal was eliminated in the first round of the 2011 Socialist presidential primary. She decided to support her former partner, François Hollande, against Martine Aubry in the second round. Almost immediately after Hollande won the primary, she declared her goal of becoming the president (Speaker) of the National Assembly, with Hollande's support. The president of the National Assembly is one of the highest positions in the land, and having a

⁵http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=434780563220746&id=107359612629511.

woman fill this position for the first time was in keeping with the Socialists' efforts at feminisation and renewal within key posts.

However, the path to becoming Speaker is never straightforward, and was particularly challenging for Royal, as she had stood down from her parliamentary seat in 2007 in order to contest the presidential election, and was now reluctant to forcibly unseat the woman who had inherited her constituency five years previously. Instead, Royal targeted a seat in La Rochelle, within the region over which she presides, and where the incumbent deputy (Maxime Bono) was standing down and supported her bid to succeed him. The main stumbling block was that a local politician, Olivier Falorni (PS first secretary for Charente-Maritime, the department within which La Rochelle is situated), had already set his sights on the seat, and did not take kindly to the suggestion that he should stand down in order to let Royal be the candidate. Once it became obvious that Falorni did not intend to make way for Royal, the Socialists declared La Rochelle to be one of the seats that would have an all-women shortlist. This could be seen as a legitimate move, as the Socialists' success in increasing the proportions of women both standing and elected has been largely due to reserving winnable vacant seats, like La Rochelle, for a woman candidate. However, on this occasion, reserving the seat for a woman was perceived by Falorni and his supporters as a cynical ploy to ensure that Royal would get the seat at Falorni's expense (AFP, 2011). Two other women also contested the seat, but Royal emerged victorious. However, Falorni insisted on maintaining his candidature, even though he had to quit the PS and run as a dissident candidate.

Royal was expected to secure more votes than Falorni in the first round, qualify to the second round and then beat the UMP candidate. As the official Socialist nominee, she led after the first round. The unexpected problem for her, however, lay in the decision by UMP voters to support Falorni rather than the UMP candidate in order to spite the high-profile Royal. As a result, Falorni garnered more votes than the UMP candidate, resulting in Falorni's unexpected qualification to the second round. Royal now faced a significant threat, as the combined votes of Falorni's own supporters and the UMP voters who were mobilising for Falorni together exceeded Royal's own vote share. Realising that her campaign was in serious trouble, she called upon Hollande to lend his support to her campaign. Hollande had thus far sought to distance himself from the legislative campaigns, aiming to follow the example of previous presidents by rising above parliamentary politics. However, given Hollande's personal relationship with Royal (they were together nearly 30 years and she is the mother of his four children), and her symbolic importance to the party, he agreed to lend his name to her campaign leaflets. On 12 June, Hollande officially endorsed Royal's campaign. This, in turn, enraged Valérie Trierweiler, Hollande's new partner and the woman for whom he left Royal. Only two hours after Hollande's

endorsement, as Martine Aubry and Cécile Duflot (leaders of the Socialist and Green parties, respectively) appeared in La Rochelle to support Royal's campaign, Trierweiler sent out a public tweet lending her support to Falorni.

'Tweetgate', as the affair rapidly became known, became the dominant story of the second round. Its implications reached far beyond its effects on Royal. Hollande had built his entire campaign around being 'Mr Normal', a quiet and modest politician who focused on the work rather than the personal trappings of the presidency, thus aiming to cast himself in a very different light to the 'bling-bling', over-mediatised showbiz lifestyle of Sarkozy. In one fell swoop, Hollande's image was undone. The parliamentary elections became overrun by stories about the health of the relationship within the presidential couple, the ongoing rivalry between Hollande's former and current girlfriends, the role of Trierweiler as 'first lady', the refusal of Hollande's (and Royal's) children ever to speak to Trierweiler again, and so on. More important political stories, such as the deals that were cut between certain desperate UMP candidates and the FN, became buried by Tweetgate.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the end result of this saga was a resounding victory for Falorni. Without a parliamentary seat, Royal was out of contention for the position of president of the National Assembly. The Socialists scrambled around for another possible female candidate. Strong rumours circulated of Marylise Lebranchu, former justice minister who had also held a senior parliamentary role in the previous legislature, but Lebranchu made it clear that she was not interested in resigning her new government post to contest the position (AFP, 2012). Instead, Elisabeth Guigou, Lebranchu's predecessor as justice minister, joined the race, declaring that 'it is essential to drive parity forward ... it is very important that at the highest levels of state office, there should be at least one woman' (Le Monde, 2012). Her claims in support of gender parity were more than just opportunism; she has spoken out on the topic before, and has authored a book about being a woman politician (Guigou, 1997). However, on this occasion she did not rally the support she needed. The role went to Claude Bartolone, resulting in continued male domination of the four most senior offices of state—president of the Republic, presidents of the Senate and the National Assembly, and prime minister.

5. A parity cabinet?

Although the very top level of politics is still the exclusive preserve of men, what about the next level down—the Cabinet? France has a long-standing tradition of having more women in its government than in its parliament. Although many ministers are drawn from parliament, this is not always the case, and it is possible

for presidents⁶ to appoint ministers without prior political experience. As a result, several presidents have used the gift of patronage to elevate little-known women into government positions—a practice known as the ‘fait du prince’, or gift of the ‘prince’ (president). Some of the women mentioned above, including Guigou and Dati, have benefited from this trend. Guigou was a highly trained technocrat and aide to François Mitterrand when she joined his government; Dati had been the spokeswoman for Sarkozy’s election campaign before becoming justice minister in 2007. Neither had previously held elected office. Although the advantages for women of entering politics in this way are obvious, there are also risks. Fast-track promotions offered to political outsiders can easily be withdrawn, and women who lack their own autonomous power base are more dependent on presidential patronage and less able to defend their turf (Sineau, 1997). Their appointment may also cause resentment, as was the case when Sarkozy nominated seven women to his first cabinet of 15 people, with women comprising a third of the government overall (Jakubyszyn, 2007). Although Sarkozy never achieved his promise of a parity government, he did originally come close to a parity cabinet, with a number of women in high-profile positions (Murray, 2009). However, by the end of Sarkozy’s term, many of these women had disappeared from public view as men reclaimed ‘their’ place in the government.

A similar occurrence was witnessed in 1995. Following the election of Jacques Chirac as president, the new prime minister, Alain Juppé, nominated no fewer than 12 women to his new government. These women were given the patronising epithet of ‘Juppettes’, which translates both as ‘mini-Juppés’ and ‘short skirts’. After only six months, 8 out of the 12 women were sacked. This bitter experience led to cynicism about the use of women ministers as window-dressing by presidents wishing to appear progressive, while ensuring that their female protégées did not become too powerful. There was some legitimate concern that a similar phenomenon might happen in 2012. Hollande made a commitment in his manifesto to ensuring gender parity in his government. During the campaign, he declared that, ‘it would be good in principle to have as many men as women in the government’, before adding, ‘which is not to say that they will have the same responsibilities’ (Guirous, 2012). This caveat, hinting that women might be relegated to secondary posts, did not go unnoticed; Marie-Jo Zimmerman, the

⁶In the event that the president and prime minister are not from the same party—a phenomenon known as co-habitation—it is the prime minister that will nominate the government. This happened in 1986–1988, 1993–1995 and 1997–2002. However, changes in the electoral calendar mean that this rare phenomenon is unlikely to be repeated, and when the prime minister is of the same party as the president, it is effectively the president who determines the composition of government.

former director of the Parity Observatory⁷ and president of the parliamentary delegation for gender equality, told AFP that ‘it is scandalous to say such things!’ (AFP 2 March 2012).

Hollande’s promise proved to be entirely accurate. He did honour his commitment to have an equal number of women and men in both the cabinet and the government. However, the responsibilities were most certainly not the same. Although Martine Aubry was the most experienced and popular choice for prime minister, Hollande opted for his loyal friend Jean-Marc Ayrault, who had no previous ministerial experience. Aubry refused any other government post; as a result, the most senior woman in the Socialist party is not a member of the new government. Also absent are Royal and Guigou, two other political heavyweights with previous governmental experience. Instead, many of the women in the new government are relatively junior, reinforcing the vulnerability associated with the ‘fait du prince’. Only one of the top positions is held by a woman: Christiane Taubira, who is not a Socialist but a member of the Radical Left Party (Parti Radical de Gauche), occupies the position of justice minister, following in the footsteps of Guigou, Lebranchu and Dati. All the other top ministries (Interior, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Defence, Work and Employment, and Industry) went to men. In this respect, the new government compares unfavourably to the first Sarkozy government, where women held ministries including Justice, Foreign Affairs and Finance. The portfolios allocated to women in 2012 were, for the most part, those with lower profiles and less power, and also those that are stereotypically associated with women and with caring roles (Davis, 1997). These include, at the cabinet level, Social Affairs and Health, Culture and Communication, Higher Education, Environment, Decentralisation, Women, Housing and the Regions, and Sport and Youth. This very gendered distribution of government portfolios mirrors the sharp gender divide in parliamentary committees, where women are heavily over-represented on the committees for Social Affairs (including health) and Cultural Affairs (including education), and almost absent from the committees on Finance, Foreign Affairs and Defence.

In the wider government, a similar picture emerges. Men got Budget, European Affairs, Cities, Parliamentary Relations, Economic Solidarity, Transport, Development, and Veterans. Women got junior posts in the ministries of Education and Justice, along with Senior Citizens, Family, Disabled People, and the less gendered posts of Commerce, Innovation and Expatriates. Thus, although the new government was more feminised, it did little to disrupt traditional gender roles and power relations. Research by Conor Little⁸ found that the positions

⁷A national body under the jurisdiction of the prime minister, set up by Chirac in 1995 to report on the state of gender parity in France.

⁸<http://conorlittle.wordpress.com/2012/05/17/brought-in-from-the-cold-or-marginalised-women-in-the-hollandeyrault-cabinet/>.

held by men were, on average, 1.6 times more powerful than those held by women. These findings reflect the gendered allocation of cabinet portfolios elsewhere (Franceschet and Thomas, 2012; Krook and O'Brien, 2012).

The new women ministers included several women still in their 30s, alongside some more senior women such as Lebranchu. Given that only four members of the entire government (including the president, prime minister and all other men) had previous ministerial experience, the relatively junior status of some of the new women in government should not be a significant disadvantage.

One strong positive to emerge from the new government was the revival of a full women's ministry. Although most governments since 1974 have included a junior post with responsibility for women, on only one previous occasion has there been a full women's ministry headed by a member of the cabinet. This was in 1981–1986, founded by Mitterrand and headed by Yvette Roudy, and the ministry was instrumental in advancing women's rights in numerous domains (Allwood and Wadia, 2009). The newly restored ministry is headed by Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, who is also the government's spokesperson, ensuring a high profile for the new women's minister.

6. Conclusion: where next for parity?

The situation for women in French politics certainly looked brighter in July 2012 than it did in April. Women now comprise 50% of both the cabinet and the wider government, occupy nearly 27% of seats in parliament and have a full women's ministry once more. The inclusion of some junior women in the new government offers up the potential for a future pipeline of women leaders. However, not all the news is positive. The government features equal numbers of women but very unequal distributions of power, so in some respects women have taken a step backward at the summit of the state. France has still never had a woman president, and Edith Cresson, who was prime minister briefly in 1991–1992, remains the only woman to hold that post. The presidencies of the two chambers of parliament are also still the exclusive preserves of men. Some of France's most senior women have been left empty-handed after the election. Meanwhile, the poor performance of some parties and notably the UMP in implementing gender parity indicates that some of the recent gains for women might even be reversed if the right were to return to power. 27% women might be a substantial improvement on the previous parliament, but it is still a long way away from parity.

One key promise made by Hollande during the election, and reiterated subsequently, is his pledge to remove all party funding for any party not respecting parity. Such a measure would remove the loophole whereby large parties can avoid implementing parity provided they can offset the losses to their first

portion of state funding. Hollande's proposal would be a smart move politically, as the main losers would be the parties of the right. Parties of the left would have little difficulty ensuring that they met the requirements of parity, and would benefit reputationally as well as scoring a big advantage over their opponents, who would be compelled to make dramatic changes to their candidate selection procedures or else face financial ruin. The consequence would be an almost guaranteed implementation of parity in terms of candidates. However, this would still address only one of the two weaknesses undermining the parity law; the other, concerning the tendency to place women candidates in unwinnable seats, could continue unabated. Further reform would be required to prevent parties from making only token efforts towards parity. Nonetheless, the proposed reform would be highly symbolic, making it clear that parity is an essential requirement of French democracy rather than an optional extra.

The future prospects for women in French politics therefore hinge on several factors. First, unless parties of the right undertake a radical programme of feminisation, women will continue to be elected in greater numbers on the left, resulting in a higher proportion of women in parliament when the left is in power. Secondly, the proposed reform to the parity legislation has the potential to make a considerable impact on the number of women candidates, although its effectiveness will depend on whether it is implemented in time for the 2017 elections, and its impact will be limited by the lack of provision for placement in winnable seats. Finally, the new women ministers might become the first women to crack the very highest glass ceilings of French politics in the future—but only if they stop being relegated to positions of 'soft' power.

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