

# No longer the laggard – how France leapfrogged the UK for women’s representation

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**British women have long envied their chic French counterparts.** However, when it comes to political representation, women have traditionally fared better north of the English Channel. From 1955 onwards, with a brief exception for the period 1978-87, there have been more women in the House of Commons than in the French National Assembly. The UK also had its own Iron Lady running the country for eleven years, whereas France has never had a female President. The only French women to serve as Prime Minister, Edith Cresson, lasted less than a year and was the shortest-serving Prime Minister of the Fifth Republic. She suffered widespread sexist vilification, and no woman has followed in her footsteps since she stood down in 1992. Even following the introduction of a gender parity law in 2000, requiring an equal number of male and female candidates at most elections, the proportion of women MPs remained lower in France than in the UK.

Yet in 2012, a different picture suddenly emerged. The proportion of women in the National Assembly shot up to nearly 27 per cent, which compares favourably to the 22 per cent of women in Westminster. In addition, newly elected French President François Hollande attracted positive headlines for nominating 50 per cent women to his new cabinet, while British Prime Minister David Cameron made headlines of a rather different sort when the number of female ministers in his cabinet fell even further from five to just four. Almost overnight, France went from being a laggard to being a role model for her European neighbours, not least the UK, which now has one of the lowest levels of women’s representation in the whole of Europe.

This article considers how France achieved this transformation, whether the reality lives up to the headlines, and whether the UK should now be taking heed of, and seeking to copy, its Gallic neighbour. The improved situation for women in French politics was less an overnight success than a long, slow process of feminisation that is still far from complete. Sexism and barriers to women remain rife in French politics, and gender equality is elusive on both sides of the Channel. What distinguishes France from her British neighbours is that she is more aware that there is a problem, and has taken greater steps to increase women’s presence in politics. Unless Britain also acknowledges the severity of its political gender gap, the gulf between the two countries looks set to widen further in the coming years, with Britain increasingly being left behind by its European neighbours.

### **Women’s representation in parliament**

The last two elections in France each saw the proportion of women in parliament increase by 50 per cent, going from 12.3 per cent in 2002 to 18.5 per cent in 2007 and

26.9 per cent in 2012. There are two main reasons for these rises. The first is France's parity law, and the second is the return to power of the left. The parity law has led to a significant rise in the number of women candidates competing for office. However, the parity law has two major flaws that have prevented it from achieving its stated goals.

Firstly, it applies only to the number of women candidates, and not to the number of women elected. As a result, French parties frequently place women candidates in unwinnable seats (Murray et al., 2012). Secondly, the law is implemented by means of a loss in state financial subsidies for parties who do not field sufficient numbers of women candidates. French parties receive state funding in two portions: the first pertains to how many votes they receive, and the second to how many seats they win. Seats attract significantly more funding than votes. Small parties who win few or no seats have no choice but to implement parity, whereas the larger parties will be more concerned with winning seats. If they feel that replacing a popular male incumbent with a lesser known female candidate might cost them the seat, they will consider it more costly to implement parity than to suffer the financial penalty for failing to do so. Hence, the parties most likely to implement parity are the same parties who have little or no bearing on the composition of parliament, while larger parties are more likely to use the income from seats won to offset the losses made through disregarding parity. This has been particularly true of parties on the right: the centre-right party, New Centre, has never elected a woman to office, while the main party of the right, the UMP, lost 36.5 per cent of the first portion of its state funding, equating to €4 million a year, or 15.3 per cent of its total income. The consequence of these two flaws with the parity law is that, twelve years and three general elections after introducing a parity law, France is still a long way away from its stated goal of 50 per cent women in politics.

Given the limitations of the parity law, especially when applied by parties of the right, the second explanation for the recent rises in the number of women deputies (MPs) is perhaps the more important. Most of the gains made to date have been achieved by parties of the left. These parties have fielded significantly more women candidates than their right-wing counterparts (see Table 1), and have made a greater effort to place these women in winnable seats. Parties from all sides of the political spectrum have been guilty of placing women in less winnable seats than men (Murray, 2010), but left-wing parties have made more of an effort to ensure that at least some women are selected in winnable seats. For example, the Socialist Party (PS) has a policy similar to that of Labour's all-women shortlists (AWS), whereby some of their target seats are reserved for a woman candidate. This policy has been crucial in ensuring that women are not relegated only to those seats that they cannot hope to win. The sizeable victory of the left in 2012 (Evans, 2012) was therefore a key explanation for the rise in the number of women deputies, in much the same way that Labour's landslide in 1997 led to an overnight doubling of the number of women in Westminster. Table 1 reveals that the percentage of women elected on the right actually declined in 2012, as many female incumbents were defending seats with small majorities that their party had not expected to win in the previous election, and they were therefore particularly vulnerable to the swing away from the right in 2012. In contrast, ten years in opposition had allowed the PS to rid themselves at least in part of the common problem in France of (male) former incumbents wishing to contest seats that they had previously held and then lost. Instead, swing seats that were won by the right in 2007 and expected to return to the left in 2012 were opened up to new candidates, a significant proportion of whom were women.

Table 1: Percentage of women candidates and women elected in France, 2002-12

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

Sources: 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).

<sup>a</sup> This figure represents the French Communist Party in 2002 and 2007, and the Front de Gauche in 2012.

<sup>b</sup> The Greens only won three seats in 2002 and four seats in 2007.

<sup>c</sup> MoDem formed as a new party in 2007 following the split from the UDF.

<sup>d</sup> UDF changed its name to New Centre (Nouveau Centre) in 2007.

<sup>e</sup> The FN did not win any seats in 2002 or 2007. Two FN candidates won their seats in 2012, one male, one female.

The combined efforts of left-wing parties and the parity law ensured that 2012 was the best ever year for women's representation in the National Assembly. However, the overall picture is far from rosy. No major party achieved 50 per cent women candidates – in fact, several parties actually fielded fewer women candidates in 2012 than in 2007, including both the PS and the UMP – and these two parties also fell short of their target percentages of women elected. In addition, stories abound of strong women candidates whose ambitions were scuppered by men from the same party. On the left, former presidential candidate Ségolène Royal was parachuted into a safe seat within the region over which she presides, and she enjoyed the support of her party and of the retiring male incumbent. However, the local male candidate who had hoped to represent the seat, Olivier Falorni, refused to stand aside for Royal. Royal was less deeply embedded in the local constituency and had made no secret of hoping to use the seat as a springboard towards nomination as the first female President (Speaker) of the French parliament. Falorni therefore stood as a dissident candidate against Royal, and he attracted significant electoral support from right-wing voters seeking to bring down the challenger to Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2007 presidential election. The combined support of local loyalists and UMP renegades was sufficient to enable Falorni to win the seat at Royal's expense, thus thwarting the ambitions of one of the most high-profile women in French politics.

Meanwhile, men on the right stood in seats claimed by women, and did so with their party's blessing. In Paris, two women sought to stand for parliament in the same constituencies where they were mayor. This is normal practice in France, where multiple office-holding is commonplace and holding a powerful local office is seen as providing strong legitimacy for becoming the parliamentary candidate (Knapp, 1991). One of these candidates, Rachida Dati, was the former justice minister under Sarkozy and one of the

most prominent women on the right. However, she found herself standing against an even bigger name – François Fillon, the outgoing Prime Minister, who had served in this post for the entirety of the Sarkozy presidency, making him France's longest-serving Prime Minister. Fillon had represented another constituency (Sarthe) for the whole of his parliamentary career; his shift to a Parisian constituency was motivated by his ambition to become the next mayor of Paris, with the ultimate goal of being the presidential nominee for the UMP in 2017. His ambitions were allowed to triumph over those of Dati, who was eventually forced to stand down. Meanwhile, Brigitte Kuster found herself being challenged in her constituency by former minister Bernard Debré. Kuster stood her ground, standing down only after the first round of voting placed her behind Debré. The legitimacy of her desire to be both the mayor and the deputy of her district was disregarded when Debré sought the parliamentary nomination, but is now being revisited as Debré has declared his wish to become the mayor, thus seeking to oust Kuster for a second time. He has rather ungraciously offered her a place on his party list for the 2014 municipal election if she surrenders the position of mayor (*Metro France*, 2012). The anger felt by UMP women over such behaviour – combined with the fact that these practices resulted in not a single woman being elected for the UMP in the Paris area – has led to the formation of a women's group within the UMP, spearheaded by Dati. In September 2012, the group presented 20 proposals to increase parity in French political and public life, and presented the list to all the candidates seeking to become the party's new leader (*l'Express*, 2012). Unless their demands are heeded, the French ideological homologues of Cameron's Conservatives will have little to offer the UK in guidance on how to make politics more inclusive of women.

Overall, the story of women's representation in the National Assembly has been one of evolution rather than revolution (Murray, 2012). The parity law did not provide the overnight quick fix that is often associated with gender quotas (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005), but even if progress has been slow, it has been sustained over multiple elections. This momentum has been assisted by a gradual tightening of the law. In 2007, the financial penalty for non-implementation was increased by 50 per cent, taking effect for the first time in 2012. The Socialists are now considering removing state funding entirely for any party that does not respect the parity law. As parties of the left are currently much closer to achieving parity than parties of the right, they would have much less difficulty in avoiding losing all their funding, so the risk to parties of the left of such a measure would be fairly low, while the cost to their rivals would be high. Aside from this partisan incentive, the measure might please the electorate, who have been supportive of gender parity from the outset (Murray et al., 2012); for this reason, the proposal was included in Hollande's presidential manifesto, and was one of the first policies to be announced after his election. Making the financial penalty so constraining would certainly ensure that parties reach the required 50 per cent of women candidates, although it would not remedy the tendency of all parties to place women in less winnable seats. Perhaps an amendment requiring a minimum percentage of women elected, or some other form of placement mandate, might be the final reform introduced another ten years down the line that helps finally to achieve the goal of 50 per cent women in parliament.

The incremental development of parity in France has made progress easier to achieve than the 50 per cent target would suggest, as parties have been able gradually to replace retiring male incumbents with women. A policy that was more constraining from the outset would have presented almost insurmountable problems for political parties, given their reluctance to deselect male incumbents (who, in any event, would have been unlikely to vote for a law that threatened their immediate removal from office). Parity has also enjoyed sustained support from public opinion, even though the issue has not always been high on

the agenda. This indicates an evolution in public attitudes in a country where quotas were once seen as an 'American' import that contradicted French notions of universalism (Lépinard, 2007; Scott, 2005). Gender quotas were declared unconstitutional in France in 1982, and the parity movement (which resulted in a constitutional amendment in order to permit parity legislation) was received with hostility in a number of quarters, including many politicians on the right, some key intellectuals on the left, and even many within the feminist movement who found the idea of quotas to be patronising (Amar, 1999; Bereni, 2007). A decade later, the concept has become normalised and some of those originally opposed to parity have admitted to being converted to the cause (Sénac, 2008).

By contrast, gender quotas and related positive discrimination measures are still treated with widespread suspicion and disdain in the UK. Labour have continued with their policy of AWS, but have done so in a manner that is very low key. AWS were also declared illegal in the UK in 1996, and the suspension of the policy resulted in a dip in the number of women elected in 2001, bucking the international trend for steady increases in women's representation. Consequently, Labour introduced the Sex Discrimination (Electoral Candidates) Act in 2002 in order to legalise the use of AWS. While this legislation was enabling, it was not constraining; no other party has followed Labour's lead. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have attempted to introduce positive action measures, such as training, mentoring and the (now-abandoned) Conservative A-list of strong women candidates. However, none of these measures has been nearly as successful in raising women's numbers as the use of AWS, not least because these policies only address supply-side problems for political recruitment (Childs, 2008). Yet research in the UK has demonstrated consistently that the main barrier to women's inclusion is a lack of demand for women candidates from political parties, who still prefer their 'favourite sons' (Campbell et al., 2006; Evans, 2008; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995).

Although resistance to women candidates is present on both sides of the Channel, there has been greater engagement with positive discrimination by the UMP than by the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats. The UMP were responsible for the 2007 legislation increasing the financial penalties for non-implementation of parity, even though they ended up paying the highest price as a result of this legislation. They were also the party to legislate for gender quotas on corporate boards, despite modelling themselves as the pro-business party. There is therefore some evidence of recognition of parity, at least at the leadership level. Nonetheless, the party as a whole continues to demonstrate quite regressive attitudes towards women, as demonstrated by the paucity of women (s)elected and by the ejection of high profile women candidates. Kuster has declared her party to be the 'anti-parity party' (Nunès, 2012). In this respect, it appears that ideology is a stronger indicator than nationality of a party's willingness to support women candidates, with a clear left-right divide on the issue in both France and the UK. This supports earlier research by Miki Caul, who found that parties of the left are more likely to present and elect women candidates to office (Caul, 1999, 2001).

### **Women in cabinet**

Another area in which France is now doing much better than the UK is in women's representation in the government, and especially the cabinet. France now has 50 per cent women in both the cabinet and the wider government, while the UK has only four female cabinet members, equating to 17.4 per cent. France's proportion of women in the cabinet is a record high and ranks them alongside the world leaders in this domain. In contrast, the proportion of women in the British cabinet went down considerably at the last election,

and declined further in the 2012 reshuffle. However, the situation in France is not quite as ideal as it might first appear.

France has traditionally had more women in its government than in its parliament (Helft-Malz and Lévy, 2000). Unlike in the UK, ministerial and parliamentary office are incompatible, meaning that not all ministers are drawn from parliament, and those who are must resign their parliamentary seats and pass them over to a reserve candidate elected alongside them for this purpose. While the government is officially nominated by the Prime Minister, the President is usually the dominant player within the dual executive, and effectively is the one who determines cabinet appointments. The opportunity for patronage afforded by this power of nomination (known as the *'fait du prince'*, or gift of the prince) has both helped and hindered the careers of women (Sineau, 2001). Many significant female politicians in France, from Elisabeth Guigou to Rachida Dati, began their career at the ministerial level and only sought elected office afterwards. The *'fait du prince'* has helped to launch these women's political careers, but their status upon appointment as political *ingénues* has rendered them very vulnerable to the whims of presidential patronage. Without an autonomous power base, they are not well placed to defend their turf, and the impressive levels of women appointed when a President first comes to power will often dwindle away as the presidency progresses. The most notable example of this was in 1995, when twelve women (a record at the time) were nominated to the government following the election of President Jacques Chirac. These women were given the patronising epithet of *'Juppettes'*, which means both 'mini-Juppés' (in reference to the Prime Minister at the time, Alain Juppé), and 'short skirts'. To add injury to insult, eight out of the twelve were dismissed within six months of their initial appointment. The outcry caused by this scandal contributed to the pressure on the right to support the parity legislation that was introduced a few years later.

While there has been no direct repeat of the *Juppettes* scandal, the number of women in Sarkozy's cabinet diminished significantly throughout his presidency. Prior to his election, Sarkozy had promised to install a parity government. This promise was not entirely met; seven out of sixteen cabinet members were women, and women comprised only one third of the wider government. Nonetheless, the first Sarkozy cabinet featured several women in powerful and prominent posts, including Dati (justice), Michèle Alliot-Marie (defence) and Christine Lagarde (finance). By 2012, only a handful of women remained in the government, and none was in a top post.

In the 2012 presidential election campaign, Sarkozy was therefore fairly mute on the topic of women's political empowerment. Resentment from men within his party that they had been overlooked in favour of lesser known women had contributed to the gradual replacement of women with men throughout the presidential term, and Sarkozy was no longer in a position to promise that anything would change if he were elected for a second term. In contrast, Hollande promised a parity government if elected. The credibility of his promise was somewhat weakened when, after declaring his support for promoting women into the government, he added, 'which is not to say that they will have the same responsibilities' (Guirous, 2012). Unfortunately, the discriminatory attitude revealed by this comment rang true once Hollande's government was appointed. He did not fully honour his commitment to a parity government, but women certainly were not placed in positions as powerful as men. Only one of the top jobs – the position of justice minister, which had already been held by several women previously and had therefore been 'feminised' – was given to a woman, Christiane Taubira. Taubira is not a Socialist but a member of the Radical Left Party, who entered into government alongside the Socialists and the Greens, thus Taubira is something of an outsider within the government. The other women ministers were given significantly less powerful, traditionally 'feminine' roles such as Social Affairs and Health,

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Culture and Communication, Higher Education, Women, and Sport and Youth. The more prestigious posts, such as Finance, Budget, Defence, Foreign Affairs and the Interior (equivalent to the Home Office), all went to men. Non-cabinet posts within the government were also gendered, with women being posted to Education and Justice, Senior Citizens, Family and Disabled People. Research by Conor Little (2012) found that 'PS women have received positions that are, on average, half as important as the positions attained by PS men'. In this respect, Hollande's government is actually a step backwards relative to the first Sarkozy government, which afforded significantly more power to its women members.

Therefore, while Hollande's government might meet the technical requirements for parity, it cannot claim to be gender equal. Several senior women within the party, such as Royal, Guigou and Martine Aubry (Socialist party leader 2008-12 and the second highest ranking member of the Jospin government in the late 1990s) were not included in the government. Their exclusion in favour of less experienced women in more junior posts indicates that the '*fait du prince*' is still alive and well in 2012, with the President commanding the loyalty of women who owe their political careers to his support. The sole advantage of this approach is that some of these women may emerge as senior players in the future, with one perhaps even becoming France's first female President.

A consolation for French women is that one of the new members of the cabinet, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, is both government spokeswoman and the minister of the newly restored Women's Rights Ministry. Although most French governments since the 1970s have included some sort of portfolio for women, only once before (under the first Mitterrand government) have women benefited from a full ministry headed by a member of cabinet. Significant progress was made for women during this time, and there is hope that the high profile of the new Women's Ministry might lead to a renewal of state feminism in the coming years.

Although the situation in France is less than ideal, it compares very favourably to that of the UK, where the low presence of women in the cabinet is compounded by the marginal portfolios that these women hold. The most powerful woman, Theresa May, occupies the 'poisoned chalice' that is the Home Office, ranked sixth in the 'power list' of ministerial pecking order (*Daily Mail*, 2012). Two of the three other women in the cabinet hold portfolios at the bottom of the power list (20th and 21st respectively out of 22 posts), while the fourth is ranked 16th. In other words, only one of the fifteen most powerful politicians in the British government is a woman. Sayeeda Warsi was demoted in 2012 to a ministerial post that allows her to attend cabinet but not to vote, while Caroline Spelman and Cheryl Gillan were both ejected from the cabinet. Neither received any honours afterwards, whereas four of the men sacked from the cabinet were compensated with knighthoods. The British cabinet is now even more heavily dominated by wealthy white men, in stark contrast to its more socially diverse French counterpart.

There is no doubt a connection between the lack of diversity in the British cabinet and the disproportionately negative impact of the government's policies on women. Research by the Fawcett Society estimated that 72 per cent of budget cuts would come out of women's pockets, compared to 28 per cent for men (Fawcett Society, 2010). This was because of a combination of redundancies in the public sector, where women comprise 64 per cent of the workforce; cuts to state benefits, of which women are the primary recipients; reduction in state services, of which women are the main users, and their replacement with unpaid labour by women; and changes to the taxation system that will hit women harder than men (Fawcett Society, 2012). The negative consequences for women of the Coalition's policies have resulted in a loss of support for the governing parties among women voters, indicating both the social and electoral cost of a government that does not include women's perspectives (Campbell and Childs, 2012).

To date, there has been no evidence of a similar crisis in the French government. One of its first acts was to renew lapsed legislation on sexual harassment. Hollande's ideological preference for stimulating economic growth is potentially more favourable to women than the British Conservatives' preference for austerity and deep cuts, although France is also compelled to make cuts in order to reduce its sizeable deficit. The nature of these cuts is not yet fully known and so their impact on women cannot be assessed. However, the presence of a women's minister at the cabinet table, alongside the other women making up half the cabinet, ensures that the French government cannot overlook the potential consequences of its actions for women. The commitment of Hollande during his election campaign to a number of women-friendly policies, ranging from better access to abortion to the promotion of gender equality in schools, indicates a government that intends to act for, rather than against, women. It is too early to tell whether French women will reap the full benefits of a more feminised polity, but it certainly looks unlikely that France will repeat the damaging policies of the British government in this regard.

## Conclusion

For most of the past fifty years, France has had one of the lowest levels within Europe of women in politics. While the UK has never been exemplary in this regard, it has at least compared favourably to its Gallic neighbour. However, the French have acknowledged that they have too few women in politics, and are working increasingly hard to overcome the problem. After being the first country in the world to pass what is effectively a mandatory 50 per cent gender quota, France has internalised the concept of gender parity within its political discourse, and the concept has reached beyond electoral politics to include government nominations and even private sector bodies. There remains considerable resistance to women's empowerment within the political elite, and women continue to hit glass ceilings at all levels. Alongside the absence of women from presidential power and their quasi-exclusion from prime ministerial power, there has never been a woman occupying the third and fourth most powerful positions, namely the Presidents of the lower and upper chambers of parliament. The key positions of power at all levels remain dominated by men. Nonetheless, women's representation continues to progress from one election to the next, and the Hollande years look set to be relatively favourable for women. In contrast, British women are faced with stagnating levels of women in parliament, a low and declining number of women in cabinet, and policies that are particularly damaging for women. France has overtaken the UK in a dramatic fashion, and if British politicians do not seriously consider adopting corrective measures *à la française*, the UK risks being left behind and becoming one of the most regressive countries in Europe for gender equality.

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