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Chapter 2 – The 2017 presidential election: continuity and change

Jocelyn Evans, Gilles Ivaldi

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Emmanuel Macron's victory in the 2017 French presidential and legislative elections has produced one of the most dramatic changes in France's politics since 1958 and an apparently profound reshaping of the bipolar polity that has traditionally dominated the Fifth Republic. Whilst incontestably rooted in the specific political opportunity structure of the 2017 presidential election, the meteoric rise and electoral success of Macron also emphasize important elements of continuity in electoral politics and the dynamics of the French political system in the longer term, and more generally in the key factors driving presidential and legislative election results in France.

This chapter explores the path dependency of the political innovation that occurred in the 2017 elections, placing the 2017 presidential race in the broader context of party competition and party system development since the mid-1980s, and looking at the Macron phenomenon across the array of socio-economic, cultural and political factors that traditionally affect electoral politics in France. We look to chart regularities in the dynamics of electoral competition and the clustering of the party system over time, placing the 2017 elections in the context of previous 'natural' swings of the electoral pendulum, including the atypical scenario of 2002. Notably, our analysis seeks to illustrate the processes and changing contours of bipolar multipartism in France, thus taking the 2017 election as yet another occurrence of change in the morphology of the party system.

We begin by looking at the set of political conditions that emerged from the post-2012 electoral cycle, which in key respects strongly resembled Sarkozy's declining presidency between 2007 and 2012. The parallels between the two presidencies are striking and they concern important drivers of French national election outcomes such as presidential and PM popularity, the unpacking of presidential party support during the legislature, mid-term election results and depression in electoral turnout, and general socio-economic performance, as well as voter dissatisfaction and the loss of public confidence about the reliability of party messages during electoral campaigns. We argue that all these variables operated in a very similar way across both Sarkozy and Hollande's presidential terms, highlighting the strong institutional and competitive inertia that exists in the French political arena, and which reduces the room for manoeuvre for incumbent Presidents and their governments, contributing to the continuation of '*hyper-alternance*' (Evans and Ivaldi 2002).

The second half of the chapter looks at the 2017 presidential race from a wider perspective, placing it in the context of previous presidential elections in France while simultaneously identifying areas of differentiation, configuration of resources and temporal opportunities encountered by Macron, which facilitated the development and success of EM!, thus precipitating the collapse of the traditional bipolar party system. We argue that three main factors mattered in 2017, namely the size of the radical vote; the rise of a viable centrist alternative; and finally the increase in fragmentation which significantly lowered the threshold for electoral relevance and qualification in the runoff. As will be discussed, fragmentation in French presidential elections is closely associated with the level of voter turnout, and it reflects more generally the increasing 'proportionalization' of France's first-order electoral politics.

1. An electoral cycle repeated: the dynamics of 2012 and 2017 compared

In our analysis of the 2012 elections (Evans and Ivaldi 2013), we emphasised the early anticipation of Nicolas Sarkozy's defeat from a number of factors: disastrous opinion poll ratings for President and Prime Minister; poor public image; progressively worse subnational electoral performance; growing challenges from the radical right-wing FN; and relative coherence of a Socialist opposition rebuilding after a period of within-party divisions. In the lead-up to the 2017 Presidential race, an almost identical set of conditions affected the Socialist incumbent to perhaps an even greater degree, suggesting a likely crushing defeat for Hollande.

Looking across both periods, this section outlines the parameters which have affected both presidential incumbents in 2012 and 2017, providing relatively stable foundations to election outcomes while simultaneously confirming the institutional and competitive inertia in France's electoral politics. These factors are summarised in Table 2.1 and they are examined comparatively across both Hollande and Sarkozy's presidencies in the following sections.

Table 2.1 Parameters of the 2012 and 2017 electoral cycles compared

Area	Sarkozy 2007-2012	Hollande 2012-2017
Public Opinion		
Presidential approval ratings (% of trust, TNS-SOFRES series)	Start of period: 63 After 1 year: 37 (-26 pts) Lowest: 20 End of cycle: 37	Start of period: 55 After 1 year: 16 (-39 pts) Lowest: 11 End of cycle: 14
Media and public criticism	Fouquet's Dinner Bolloré's Yacht <i>"Casse toi pauvre con"</i>	Trierweiller's tweet in the 2012 legislatives Julie Gayet love affair <i>Un président ne devrait pas dire ça</i> Book
Voter political cynicism and mistrust		
% who trust neither the left nor the right in government, CEVIPOF Barometer	52 (October 2011)	63 (December 2016)
% satisfied with way democracy works, CEVIPOF Barometer	40 (October 2011)	29 (December 2016)
Elections		
Subnational elections: drop in electoral support for the incumbent	Regional (2010), Cantonal (2011)	Municipal (2014), European (2014), Departmental (2015), Regional (2015)
Challenge from the radical right	Regional (2010), Cantonal (2011) Voting intention polls	Municipal (2014), European (2014), Departmental (2015), Regional (2015) Voting intention polls
Parties and blocs		
Split in the presidential majority	UDI	Greens (EELV)

Coherence in the opposition party
rebuilding

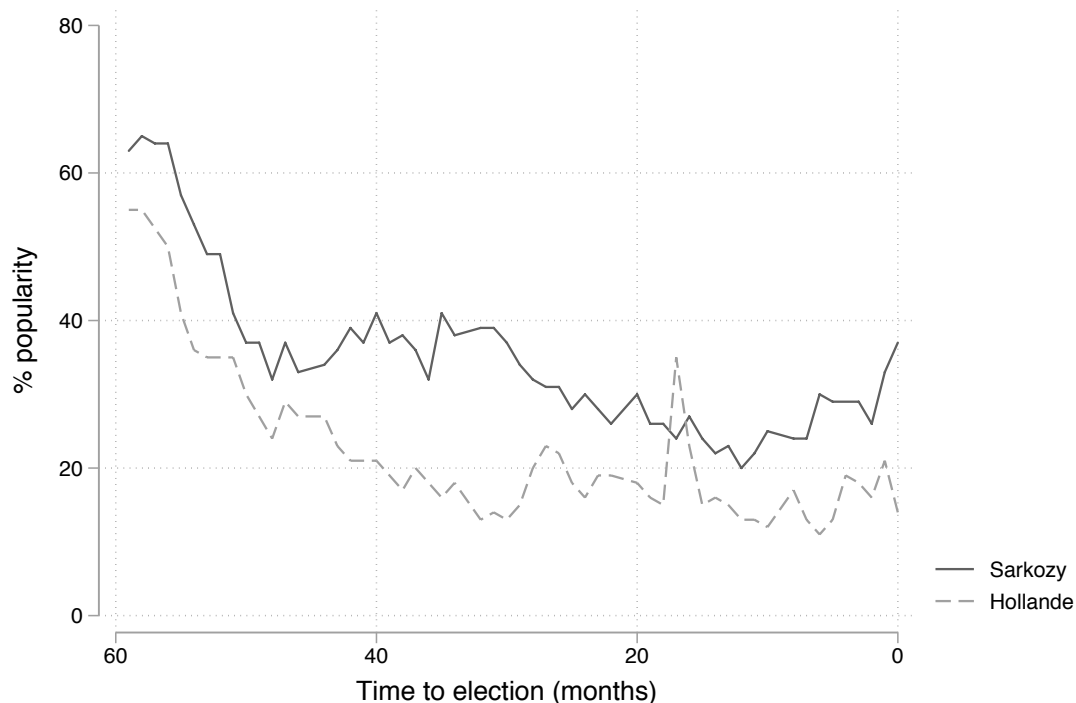
Reims party congress 2008
PS primary election of 2011

Taubira (PRG)
November 2012 leadership
election in the UMP
LR primary election of 2016

1.1. Public opinion

A first area concerns public opinion and presidential approval, which showed important similarities in 2012 and 2017. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, both Hollande and Sarkozy faced record political discontent with their policies and styles of presidency, confronting a dramatic decline in public support after only a brief honeymoon period.

Figure 2.1 Comparative pre-election presidential popularities (2012-2017)



Note: TNS-SOFRES monthly presidential popularity data; % of respondents who say they ‘trust the President to solve the problems of the country’ (2012-2017).

Source: <http://www.tns-sofres.com/cotes-de-popularites>

In 2007, Sarkozy had entered presidential office with nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of positive ratings, but dropped 26 percentage points in the first year alone. His approvals had reached the lowest towards the end of the cycle with just a fifth of the French saying they trusted the president, showing a rebound just before the election to 37 per cent. A similar pattern was found in Hollande with his disastrous approval ratings showing an accentuation of the previous trend. In 2012, Hollande began his presidency with the lowest level of popular support ever achieved by a French president, at 55 per cent of positive ratings. Within a year, he had seen his popularity decline to only 24 per cent, a

substantial drop of over 30 points. Notwithstanding a short-lived rebound in popularity associated with the response to terrorist attacks in November 2015, on average presidential approval remained near an all-time low below 20 per cent throughout the last three years of Hollande's term, constantly lower than comparable figures for Sarkozy in the previous cycle, and ending at 14 per cent on the eve of the 2017 elections.

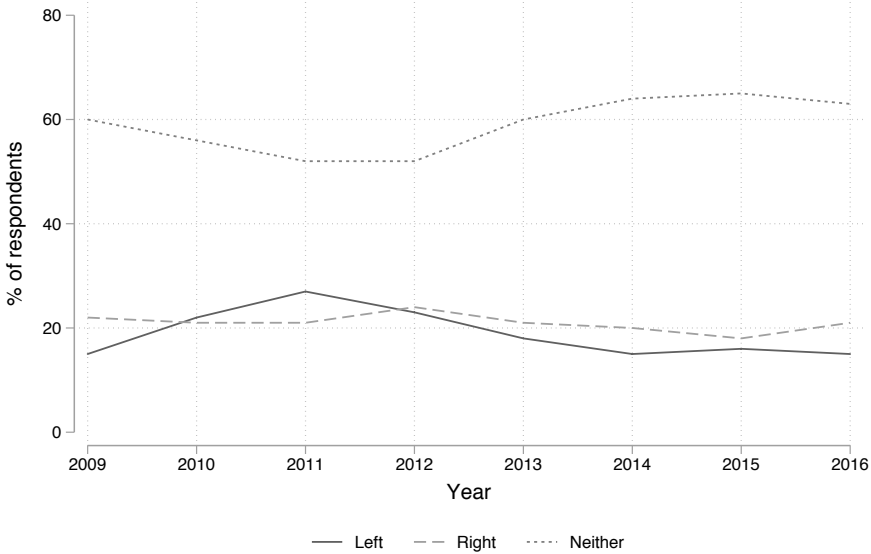
Linked to this, both presidents' styles were the subject of significant media and public criticism – Sarkozy too arrogant, almost monarchical in his bearing and enjoyment of the trappings of power; Hollande too reticent and uncomfortable in the public spotlight. Political controversies punctuated both presidencies, beginning with the Fouquets' dinner and Bolloré yachting holiday in the early stage of Sarkozy's term, which were mirrored by similar scandals during Hollande's presidency such as Valérie Trierweiler's tweet against Ségolène Royal in 2012 legislatives, Hollande's secret love affair with actress Julie Gayet and the many revelations in the 2016 book *Un président ne devrait pas dire ça*.

In both cases, public distrust and voter discontent during the electoral cycle were fostered by the disconnect between the performative and essentially rhetorical acts of the presidential campaign, on the one hand, and the reality of hard policies, on the other hand, contributing to the perception of politicians as essentially unresponsive, and of the polity as static. As had already been the case in the mid-1980s, the 2014 economic policy U-turn by the socialist government, and its adoption of a clear social-liberal agenda, undermined the credibility of previous 'hard left' campaign messages, fuelling anger amongst left-wing voters. In the early stages of his presidency, Sarkozy had been strongly criticized for his 'bling-bling' style, hardly compatible with his campaign claim to represent France's hard-working middle and working classes, *La France qui se lève tôt* (the France that gets up early). Amidst the financial crisis, austerity policies by Fillon's government had tarnished Sarkozy's reputation as a candidate of the *pouvoir d'achat*, alienating a large tranche of his electorate in the *classes populaires*.

Across both presidencies, the depth of political discontent not only with the incumbent but also with the main opposition party was further revealed in public attitudes reflecting a more structural estrangement of voters from the governing parties of the left and right in France. Disaffection with party politics and anti-elite sentiments dominated both Hollande and Sarkozy's presidencies, with an average majority of six in ten voters expressing their distrust of both the Left and the Right's ability to govern the country, thus keeping political space open for alternatives outside the main party channels (see Figure 2.2). Over the same period, an average 85 per cent of voters would agree that "politicians do not really care about what people think", while 57 and 65 per cent on average of the French under Sarkozy and Hollande, respectively, were generally pessimistic about their future.¹

¹ <http://www.cevipof.com/fr/le-barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof/resultats-1/vague8/>

Figure 2.2 Public opinion trust of the Left and the Right (2009–2016)



Note: CEVIPOF Baromètre de la confiance politique 2009–2016 (end-of-the-year surveys conducted in December); % respondents who said that they trust the Left; the Right, or neither the Left nor the Right to govern the country.

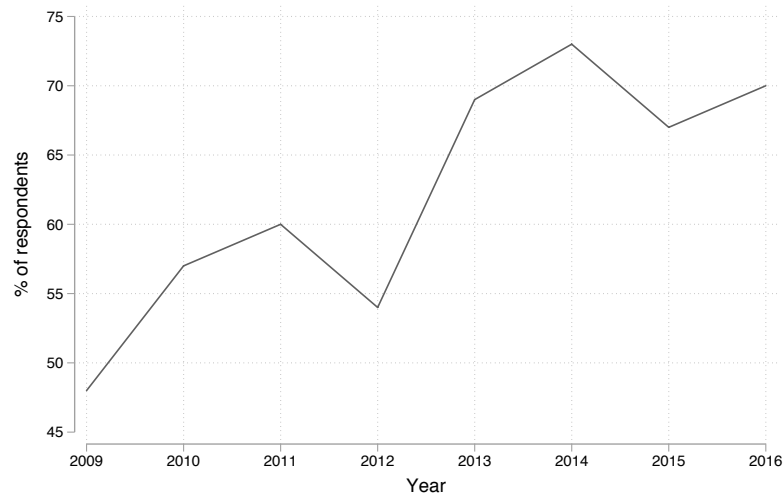
Source: <https://www.opinion-way.com/fr/sondage-d-opinion/sondages-publies/politique/barometre-de-la-confiance-en-politique.html>

Looking at the ‘end-of-cycle’ popularities of the two dominant parties over the 2007-2017 period clearly shows that the mainstream right failed to truly provide an opposition to Hollande’s socialists in the 2017 elections. Five years earlier, in the wake of a successful primary, the PS had enjoyed a significant increase in popular support, with no less than 51 per cent of positive ratings, against only 29 per cent for the incumbent UMP. By the end of Hollande’s presidency, support for the socialists had logically fallen to 27 per cent, yet, in sharp contrast with the previous election, polls demonstrated that the UMP had not rebuilt its credibility as the main party of opposition. Clearly, the party had not repaired the damage caused by its many political scandals, leadership rivalries and in-party fighting since 2012. On the eve of the 2017 presidential race, which had been deemed impossible for the right to lose, UMP popularity had slumped to 27 per cent, placing the party on an equal footing with the ruling socialists².

The drop in support for traditional parties was reflected in the persistently high level of dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in France throughout both Sarkozy and Hollande’s presidencies. As the CEVIPOF Barometer data in Figure 2.3 suggest, there was a clear trend towards strong negative perceptions of the democratic quality of France’s polity since 2009, averaging 55 and 66 per cent under Sarkozy and Hollande, respectively, and culminating at 70 per cent in the lead up to the 2017 elections.

² TNS-SOFRES political popularity trends, <http://www.tns-sofres.com/cotes-de-popularites>

Figure 2.3 Dissatisfaction with democracy in France (2009–2016)



Note: CEVIPOF Baromètre de la confiance politique 2009–2016 (end-of-the-year surveys conducted in December); % respondents ‘not satisfied’ with the way democracy works.

Source: <https://www.opinion-way.com/fr/sondage-d-opinion/sondages-publies/politique/barometre-de-la-confiance-en-politique.html>

1.2. Mid-term electoral results

Linked to the above context of citizen disaffection, a second parallel existing between the two electoral cycles is that of incumbent performances in mid-term elections. While incumbent parties are typically expected to perform less well in second-order sub-national elections, both the UMP and the PS in government nonetheless performed substantially worse than this during Sarkozy and Hollande’s presidencies, with both also having to confront significant electoral challenges from the radical right.

Beginning with Sarkozy, the ruling UMP had been dealt a series of electoral blows between 2007 and 2012, experiencing a first notable setback in the 2008 municipal and cantonal elections, where the right had lost some of traditional strongholds, with the left capturing 29 out of the 40 largest cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more, and winning 58 out of 102 general councils across French departments. Sarkozy’s UMP then suffered heavy losses in the 2010 regional elections, where the socialists in opposition had picked up 21 out of 22 metropolitan regional councils – the notable exception being Alsace. In March 2011, the mainstream Right abandoned another four departments to the left and lost control of the Senate for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic.

Similarly, poor incumbent performances in mid-term elections were key to Hollande’s presidency. Early signs of voter anger with the ruling socialists were seen in local by-elections in 2013 amidst the political tremors provoked by the Cahuzac financial scandal. The first significant warning shots were fired in the 2014 municipal elections, however, in which the PS suffered devastating losses, their biggest since the electoral debacle of 1983, with the party giving up no less than 150 municipalities of more than 10,000 inhabitants, which produced a 62 per cent majority for the UMP and its centre-right allies in the larger urban areas. Nationally, the mainstream right seized an additional 155 municipalities of over 9,000 inhabitants, which included symbolic wins in some of the left’s historical strongholds such as Toulouse, Limoges, Montbéliard and Quimper, as well as a number of former

left-wing bastions in the suburban 'red belt' around Paris, such as Villejuif, Villepinte, Aulnay-sous-Bois, Argenteuil, Colombes, Saint-Ouen and Bobigny.

In May 2014, the deeply unpopular socialist government suffered its worst score in the European elections, winning a paltry 14 per cent, in third place behind the FN and the UMP, and their worst performance since 1979 – close to Michel Rocard's disastrous showing in the 1994 elections with 14.5 per cent of the national vote. The 2014 elections underlined the growing spatial and social polarisation of the PS support in bourgeois metropolitan areas such as Paris and Lyon, while the more traditional working and lower middle class support for the PS would be increasingly turning to the FN (Jaffré 2016).

That the radical right was the main beneficiary of voter discontent with the ruling socialists was evidenced further in the 2015 departmental elections, where the PS won less than a fifth of the vote nationally, as opposed to 25.7 per cent for the FN and 29.3 per cent for the various parties of the centre-right and Modem. Majoritarian rule together with the premium for local *notables* that is typically found in cantonal elections in France gave the right-wing alliance a landslide victory with a total of 67 departmental councils, including strongholds of the left such as Nord, Seine-Maritime, Allier and Côtes-d'Armor, as well as, and more symbolically, Hollande's Corrèze and Valls' department of Essonne. The 2015 regional elections confirmed electoral dominance of the FN, however, as Le Pen's party topped the polls at 27.7 per cent of the vote nationally. Whilst rolling back on the previous monopoly of the Left across regional councils, the winning by the UMP-UDI-MODEM alliance of seven regions looked like a mediocre performance, particularly given that right-wing wins in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) and Nord-Pas de Calais-Picardie (NPDCP) were largely due to the PS standing down from the runoff to block FN candidates Marine Le Pen and Marion Maréchal-Le Pen from regional power.

Both presidencies were increasingly overshadowed by the threat of the radical right, following the electoral revitalization of the FN. After a period of shallow waters between 2007 and 2009, the FN had made its first significant comeback at a relatively late stage in Sarkozy's presidency, winning 11.4 and 15.1 per cent of the vote in the 2010 regional and 2011 cantonal elections, respectively. The 2011 cantonal elections were Marine Le Pen's first real-life test after her accession a few weeks earlier. Her undeniable success, moreover in a local structure of competition traditionally adverse to the FN, was seen as the first sign of the political rejuvenation and 'de-demonization' of Jean-Marie Le Pen's 'old' extreme right. Meanwhile, voting intentions for Le Pen peaked at 24 per cent, putting the far right candidate on top of presidential polls for the first time ever, but a lead that she would soon lose to Sarkozy and Hollande³.

The FN's progression was even more spectacular during Hollande's presidency, showing significant gains across all second-order elections in 2014 and 2015. Beginning with the 2014 municipals, the FN secured a total of 1,544 municipal councillors across the country and 11 municipalities, taking most notably the 7th sector of Marseille and the larger city of Fréjus in the department of Var. In May 2014, the FN won its first national election ever, topping the European election with 24.9 per cent of the vote and 24 seats in the European parliament. From May 2014 onwards, polls would have Le Pen leading the first round of the 2017 presidential against Hollande and Sarkozy, with scores regularly in excess of 25 per cent, and peaks well above 30 per cent. The FN leader would in most cases be relegated to second place where Juppé was the candidate for the right, yet still enjoyed a substantial lead over all other candidates, systematically progressing into the runoff.

³ 'Un nouveau sondage illustre la dynamique Marine Le Pen', http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/03/05/un-nouveau-sondage-illustre-la-dynamique-marine-le-pen_1489056_823448.html

The March 2015 departmental elections represented another step towards FN institutionalization. The party achieved its best score ever in a local election, winning 25.2% of the vote, a performance which was replicated a few months later in the December regional elections where the FN emerged as France's most popular party at 27.8% of the national vote. The FN took the lead in six regions, with scores above 40% in its traditional Mediterranean and Northern strongholds of PACA and NPDCP. FN lists received nearly 7 million votes in the second round of the regionals, even surpassing Marine Le Pen's presidential score of 6.4 million in 2012, and giving the party a total of 358 regional councillors.

1.3. Party cohesion and the discipline of blocs

Finally, one last important variable concerns the unpacking of presidential party support and the relative coherence of the opposition party rebuilding during the legislature, which operated in a similar way across both Sarkozy and Hollande's presidential terms. These aspects will be covered more extensively in chapter 4, yet, as key elements common to the two presidential terms, and, beyond those, to previous periods of French government, they are briefly reviewed below.

Both Sarkozy and Hollande had faced fragmentation and splits in their legislative majorities towards the end of their presidential term. In 2011, the UMP had seen its more moderate centre-right allies in the Nouveau Centre (NC) and Parti Radical (PR) leave the presidential majority in protest against the 'hard right' strategy endorsed by Sarkozy in preparation for the 2012 campaign, and this had resulted in the creation of an independent centrist party, the Union des Démocrates et Indépendants (UDI) in September 2012. A similar unpacking of the presidential majority occurred during Hollande's term, yet at a much earlier stage of his presidency, whereby Hollande's leadership had been challenged by a group of rebellious socialist MPs, the *frondeurs*, who opposed austerity measures pushed forward by Jean-Marc Ayrault's government. Hollande's social liberal turn from 2014 onwards had alienated further the left of the socialist party, as well as the Greens and the left Radicals. Both EELV and the PRG had distanced themselves from the PS after Valls' government had proposed stringent anti-terrorist legislation, including the most controversial proposal to strip terrorists with dual citizenship of their French nationality.

In both the PS and the UMP, electoral defeat in the presidential election triggered factionalism and in-fighting. On the left, factionalism had occurred in the disastrous Reims Congress of 2008, where Martine Aubry very narrowly defeated Ségolène Royal for the Socialist leadership, but nonetheless failed to reunite the party. Aubry's legitimacy as party leader was challenged in the 2011 primary election that she eventually lost to Hollande. In 2012, immediately after Sarkozy was ousted from the presidency, the UMP had undergone a chaotic leadership contest in November 2012, which had almost split the party. Copé's disputed election with a narrow 50.3% of the membership vote amidst allegations of electoral fraud within the party led Fillon to temporarily break away from the UMP to form his own dissident rival parliamentary group, *Rassemblement-UMP*, together with another 67 right-wing deputies. A short-lived political endeavour, Fillon's group was dissolved in January 2013, however, after a peace agreement had been reached between him and Copé to resolve an ongoing crisis which could severely and durably damage the mainstream right, postponing leadership rivalry to an open primary to be held in 2016 to select the UMP's presidential champion.

Both parties had rebuilt themselves as opposition forces, however, achieving some degree of internal cohesiveness after a period of within-party divisions, while simultaneously securing electoral partnerships with their traditional allies. In both the PS and the UMP, electoral defeat led to a renewal of the internal party procedures and nomination of candidates through balanced open primaries, providing a 'unified' candidate to challenge an unpopular incumbent (see Chapter 3).

Meanwhile, both parties were able to re-establish leadership over their respective bloc, forging alliances with the minor parties around them. Parties of the Left had displayed a good deal of republican discipline during Sarkozy's presidency, which prefigured the union of all left-wing forces against the right in 2012. The PS had negotiated stable electoral deals with the smaller parties of the centre-left such as the PRG, while simultaneously securing a common legislative platform with EELV's Greens. Similarly, during Hollande's term, despite disagreement over strategy and policies, the parties of the moderate right managed to build a more cohesive bloc ahead of 2017. The new cooperative strategies were pushed forward in the 2015 elections, resulting in a competitive bloc that accommodated the entirety of the UMP and the UDI, as well as Bayrou's Modem, marking a return to traditional patterns of co-operation on the right of French politics.

2. Party system trends

One year prior to the 2017 race, the French political system appeared irrevocably locked into a situation of alternation between Left and Right. The institutional logic which had funnelled French political competition from the instability and fragmentation of the Fourth Republic to the *quadrille bipolaire* of the 1970s and early 1980s, and whose period of mismatched executive partners during *cohabitation* had apparently been solved with a simple harmonisation of presidential and legislative cycles, had settled close to an executive majoritarian logic of presidentialised governmentalism, a hybrid of that originally conceived in the Gaullian and Debré constitutional models (Duhamel, 1984: 621).

The resilience of the French party system, from the balanced four-party array of 1978 to the bipartisan dominance of 2012, is impressive in this respect. Since Bartolini's identification of the institutional and electoral logic shifting the remnants of the Fourth Republic's polarised pluralism towards moderate pluralism (1984), this type of party system has remained the baseline for French political competition, despite the varied challenges to it – the 'stress, strain and stability' of the system (Cole, 2003). Those challenges have come from a number of directions – from new party actors, from internal party schisms, and from a multiplicity of different electoral levels.

In some cases, these challenges have simply been absorbed by the institutional framework without threatening any significant disruption to the system's dynamics in the long term. The advent of the Green party as a relevant political competitor on the Left-Right spectrum, whilst disruptive to the party itself (Boy, 2003), was absorbed easily enough by the Left bloc. The splits and reconfigurations on the Right, from the separation of *Démocratie Libérale* (DL) from the UDF in 1998, to the formation of the UMP in 2002, and the ever-shifting constellation of the centre-right, currently shaped as the UDI, has for the most part seen the assertion of cooperation across the various actors in the second round of presidential and legislative elections.

Both aspects have been sustained by the presence of the so-called 'electoral accordion' (Parodi, 1992), opening up for regional and European elections held under proportional representation, and allowing new and smaller parties a success which raises their profile even in elections held under the 'closed' majoritarian logic of legislatives and presidentials.⁴ Key to the implantation of *Les Verts* and *Génération Ecologie*, as well as to the FN in the beginning of its first period of local implantation, the European election counterpart seemed likely to serve the *souverainiste* movement, *Rassemblement*

⁴ In some instances, the electoral accordion has been invoked between legislative and presidential elections, for example in 2002 where the fragmentation of candidates in the presidential race was replaced by a concentration of parties in the legislatives (Martin and Salomon, 2004).

pour la France (RPF), of Charles Pasqua and Philippe de Villiers, in 1999, until the split and eventual de facto partnership between the RPF and UMP.

More complex characterisations of the party system as ‘hybrid’ (Knapp, 1999: 114) or ‘asymmetrical multipartism’ (Cole, 2013: 18) have still acknowledged the underlying bipolarity which pertains in presidential races, indicative of the resilience of the format to the challenges. In party system terms, we can identify three challenges to the stability of the party system since the period of ‘ideal-type’ moderate pluralism: the emergence and implantation of radical challengers; the emergence of a viable centrist alternative; and the fragmentation of party supply, the latter also being linked with levels of voter turnout. As we shall discuss, these challenges have varied over time, and their impact on the system has equally been variable. However, it is only in 2017 that systemically all three were sufficiently strong to result in the foundations being laid for a structural transformation of the party system. We will look at each of these in turn, before considering their impact in the 2017 presidential race.

2.1. The emergence of radical challengers - polarization

On the right of the French political system, the presence of the FN over almost half-a-century has shrouded its rise to electoral relevance in the 1980s as a recent critical juncture in party system development and, until this election, perhaps the most recent. From the single-issue anti-immigrant party, through a period of neo-liberalism and potential rapprochement with the Moderate Right, to its position as a pariah party of the Radical Right, cut off from its Gaullist neighbours by a *cordon sanitaire* which allowed no electoral alliance and, further, saw the implementation of the *front républicain* when its electoral success did increase, the FN has since the 1990s acted as a disruptive political influence.

However, the FN’s nuisance potential – defined as instances in which the electoral pressure from FN significantly affects election results – has been limited in most national elections. The FN’s disruptive power was most visible in the 1997 legislative elections, where the party’s extensive presence in three-way second-round runoffs deprived the RPR-UDF cartel of a likely victory, and again in the 2002 presidential election where Jean-Marie Le Pen beat the PS candidate, Lionel Jospin, to second place. The last case was the 2012 presidential election where Le Pen concentrated her attacks against Sarkozy in the second round, depriving him of the votes needed to defeat Hollande (Evans and Ivaldi 2013).

At the national level, the FN’s story has been one of electoral failure, or perhaps more precisely, under-performance, due mostly to the party’s deficit in governmental credibility and extremist reputation, as well as to its inability to foster co-operation with the moderate right in order to achieve competitiveness under France’s majoritarian two-round electoral system. Leaving aside the brief period of legislative presence under proportional representation from 1986 to 1988 – an indication of the power of the rules of the game in allocating seats from votes – the FN has never been able to exploit seemingly long periods of increases in its vote share. Between the 1986 legislative elections and the 2002 presidential first round, the FN and its presidential candidate increased its vote share consistently in legislative and presidential race, with the exception of the confirmatory legislative election in 1988 (where it nonetheless kept its score almost identical to the PR election two years earlier) (Table 2.2). This was followed with a period of low electoral tides and internal feuds, which paved the way for a change in party leadership and the advent of Marine Le Pen in 2011.

Table 2.2 FN national electoral results since 1973

Year	Election	% valid	Year	Election	% valid
1973	Legislative	0.5	1999	European	5.7
1974	Presidential	0.7	2002	Presidential	16.9
1978	Legislative	0.8	2002	Presidential ⁽¹⁾	17.8
1979	European	1.3	2002	Legislative	11.3
1981	Presidential	—	2004	Regional	14.7
1981	Legislative	0.3	2004	European	9.8
1984	European	11.0	2007	Presidential	10.4
1986	Legislative	9.6	2007	Legislative	4.3
1986	Regional	9.6	2009	European	6.3
1988	Presidential	14.4	2010	Regional	11.4
1988	Legislative	9.7	2012	Presidential	17.9
1989	European	11.7	2012	Legislative	13.6
1992	Regional	13.7	2014	European	24.9
1993	Legislative	12.4	2015	Departmental ⁽²⁾	25.2
1994	European	10.5	2015	Regional	27.7
1995	Presidential	15.0	2017	Presidential	21.3
1997	Legislative	14.9	2017	Presidential ⁽¹⁾	33.9
1998	Regional	15.0	2017	Legislative	13.2

⁽¹⁾ Second-round runoff; ⁽²⁾ Local elections with FN presence in nearly all the cantons.

Source: Ministry of Interior

The FN has entered a new political era following Marine Le Pen's accession in 2011, seeking to address issues of credibility and to detoxify its extremist reputation to present a more amenable political profile to voters. The recent history of the FN under Marine Le Pen has been one of consolidated electoral returns and organizational development across all levels of national and local competition (Ivaldi and Lanzone 2016). Hollande's presidency was marked by an uninterrupted series of FN successes. The radical right made significant gains across all intermediary elections from 2012 onwards, and polls anticipated another 'historic' performance by Le Pen in the 2017 elections.

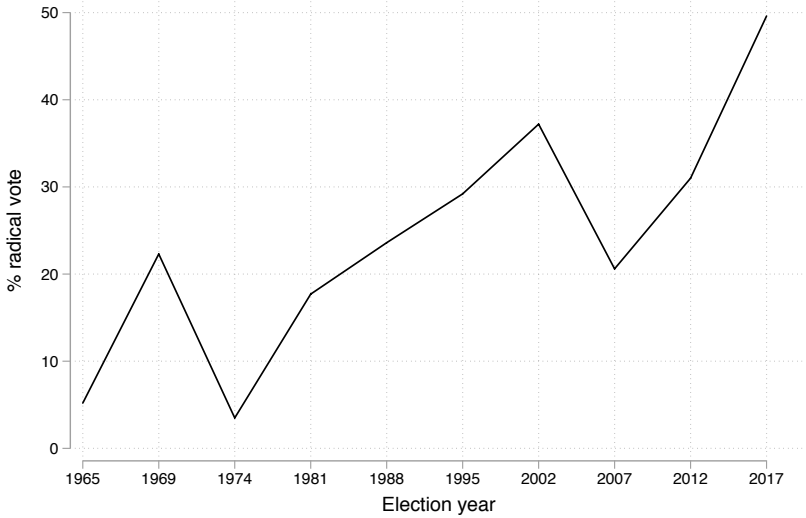
Meanwhile, the 2012-2017 period saw a significant reshaping of the French radical left, with the rise of a new political movement, namely Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (LFI). The once dominant actor of the radical left, the Communist party (PCF), had irremediably declined during the 1980s and 1990s (Bell and Criddle 1989). In the early 2000s, the Communists had been temporarily replaced by an invigorated extreme left represented by small Trotskyite parties and presidential candidates, most notably Arlette Laguiller's *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO) and Olivier Besancenot's *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR). While operating with a weak organizational infrastructure, the extreme left had capitalized on the divisions amongst former members of Jospin's *gauche plurielle* – which notably included a 'cartelized' Communist party – and they had hampered a significant share of the left-wing vote in the 2002 presidential election, winning a total of 10.4 per cent. During 2005, the European Constitution referendum campaign had brought together a coalition of protest movements to the left of the socialists, while simultaneously splitting the PS in two, thus contributing to the victory of the 'No' (Ivaldi, 2006). However, the 2007 elections had seen a fragmentation of the far left, and a return to former socialist dominance.

A new unitary force, the *Front de Gauche* (FG) emerged in 2008 from the left's campaign against the Lisbon Treaty, from a joint venture between the Communists and Mélenchon's newly created *Parti*

de Gauche (PG). The FG successfully mimicked the radical strategy of *Die Linke* in Germany, progressively reclaiming leadership over the ‘*gauche de la gauche*’ in the French party system, which resulted in the marginalization of the smaller far left groups that had emerged in 2002. Despite a propitious economic context, the FG was duly hampered by the bipolar dynamics of the 2012 presidential election, however, with Mélenchon winning a mere 11.1 per cent, well below his expectations during the campaign. Diverging strategic views and a series of poor electoral returns undermined the cohesion of the FG during Hollande’s presidency (see chapter 4), leading to a split and the creation by Mélenchon of his own movement, LFI. The foundation by Mélenchon of his own party signalled significant changes in his mobilization strategy, notably his adopting a more populist and Eurosceptic orientation strongly opposing EU austerity and fiscal orthodoxy, which was articulated with previous claims of constitutional reform – by means of a constituent assembly that would initiate the move towards a new regime – and the former FG’s smorgasbord of generous redistributive policies. This new left-wing populist agenda, clearly resembling Podemos’ strategy in Spain, allowed Mélenchon to capture an unprecedented 19.6 per cent of the vote in the 2017 presidential election, clinging to fourth place.

To date, 2002 had represented the presidential election where the extremist vote had been the highest, proportionately. Evidently, the most salient memory from this election was the progression of Jean-Marie Le Pen to the second round. However, this was also the election where Radical Left candidates beyond the PCF garnered over 10 percent of the vote for the first time. Yet, the presidential race of 2017 surpassed even 2002 in the share of vote going to candidates from extreme parties.⁵

Figure 2.4 Polarisation as the total size of the radical vote in presidential elections (1965–2017)



Source: Ministry of Interior official figures, in % of the valid vote cast; authors’ calculations.

⁵ We use ‘extreme’ in the sense of Sartori’s anti-system parties, namely parties which represent a challenge to the existing political order, and which reject coalition and are rejected by their nearest moderate neighbour (Sartori, 1976: ##) LFI’s coalition potential from the moderate neighbour is perhaps debatable, given Hamon’s (rejected) offer of a pact with Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Figure 2.4 plots the level of polarisation in the system as the total size of the radical vote in each election. Before 2017, the highest level of polarisation can be seen in 2002 where radical parties totalled 37.2 per cent of the vote. In 2017, the score leaps to just under parity with parties of the mainstream. The combined support for Mélenchon, Poutou, Arthaud, Dupont-Aignan, Le Pen, and the three micro-candidates almost reached 50 percent. Abstention may have been some six points lower than in 2002, but the election which thus far had been characterised as '*un vote de tous les refus*' (Perrineau and Ysmal, 2003) and '*le nouveau désordre électoral*' (Cautrès and Mayer, 2004) largely on account of the level of radicalised vote, had seen an eventual wholesale rejection of Radical Right-wing extremism in the second round, and the establishment of a Centre-Right government in support of its president, leading into three successive electoral cycles including alternation between Left and Right.

2.2. Centrist alternative

A second significant area of differentiation in the 2017 elections was the presence of a viable centrist alternative both as presidential party – namely *En Marche!* – and candidate – i.e. Emmanuel Macron. Where the 1978 legislatives had produced four parties of almost identical vote share in the *quadrille bipolaire*, the 2017 presidential square-dance featured four candidates, if not four poles, disrupting a clear Left-Right balance. While anti-system Left and Right, as well as Moderate Right, remained stable as political loci across the more recent electoral periods, the centrist position claimed by Macron represented a highly unstable competitive location generally deemed a losing position under the institutional context.

The history of centrism under the Fifth Republic has largely been one of single-election promise followed by failure. Jean Lecanuet, president of the centre-right *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP), performed well in the 1965 Presidential election (15.6 percent) but the formation of the *Centre Démocrate* (CD) for the subsequent legislative elections saw the party unable to compete between François Mitterrand's *Fédération de la Gauche Démocrate et Socialiste* (FGDS) and the Gaullist *Union des Démocrates pour la Cinquième République* (UDR) (Elgie, 1996: 155). In the 1969 election, Alain Poher, President of the Senate from the CD, and therefore acting president after the resignation of De Gaulle, won 23.3 percent of the vote and proceeded to the second round, behind the Gaullist and former Minister of the Economy, Georges Pompidou, who led Poher by over 20 points. As an amalgam of vestiges of Fourth Republic Centre parties, the CD's success was predicated upon the fragmentation on the left, and it was simply unable to build upon potential support against the party machine of the Gaullist UDR backing Pompidou.

The first viable centrist alternative to traditional Gaullist dominance was Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's *Républicains Indépendants* (RI) in the early 1970s, which formed the support base for Giscard's successful presidential bid in the 1974 elections. In some respects, parallels can be drawn with Macron despite his operating in a very different political context from that of Giscard in the 1970s. Alongside ideological commonalities between Giscard and Macron, both centrist candidates emerged from within the ruling majority – Gaullist for Giscard, Socialist for Macron, and both would progressively distance themselves from their previous political attachments, precipitating the fall of their mentors, only to capitalize on the internal divisions they had provoked in their former camp. In 1974, within-party rivalries and in-fighting in the Gaullist UDR deeply weakened Chaban-Delmas' candidacy, offering a propitious electoral opportunity for Giscard. Similarly, in 2017, Macron's emancipation from the PS was rendered possible largely because of the fragmentation in the socialist camp. Finally, in both cases, the centrist 'outsider' received support from splinter moderate groups from the previous majority: in 1974, Giscard was endorsed by the anti-Chaban sector of the UDR, notably Jacques Chirac, while, in 2017, Macron received official support from social liberals in the PS, such as Manuel Valls.

In the wake of Giscard's defeat in 1981, the UDF moved back to the right, however, regularly co-operating with the RPR in legislative elections, while abandoning its previous leadership to Chirac's RPR and, from 2002 onwards, to the UMP. As Table 2.3 illustrates, all successive centrist candidates after 1981 failed to achieve a level of presidential vote share similar to Giscard. In 1988, Raymond Barre came closest to disrupting Gaullist presidential dominance at 16.5 per cent of the vote just behind Chirac at 20 per cent. The influence of the UDF declined throughout the 1990s and early 2000s due to internal division and the making of an organizationally consolidated unitary right-wing party in the form of the UMP in 2002.

Table 2.3 Electoral results of centrist candidates in national elections (1974-2017)

Year	Election*	% valid	Candidate / party
1974	P	32.6	Valéry Giscard d'Estaing
1978	L	21.5	UDF
1981	P	28.3	Valéry Giscard d'Estaing
1981	L	19.2	UDF
1986	L	Unitary lists with the RPR	Proportional representation
1988	P	16.5	Raymond Barre
1988	L	18.5	UDF
1993	L	18.6	UDF
1995	P	—	UDF support to Gaullist candidate E. Balladur (18.6%)
1997	L	14.7	UDF
2002	P	6.8	François Bayrou
2002	L	4.8	UDF
2007	P	18.6	François Bayrou
2007	L	7.6	UDF-Mouvement Démocrate
2012	P	9.1	François Bayrou (MODEM)
2012	L	1.8	Centre pour la France
2017	P	24.0	Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!), first round
2017	P	66.1	Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!), second round
2017	L	32.3	LRM+MODEM

Note: *P=Presidential; L=Legislative.

Source: Ministry of Interior, National Assembly

Thus, after Barre in 1988, it would be nearly twenty years until a centrist candidate would achieve a similar level of vote share. In 2007, François Bayrou from the UDF staked his presidential platform upon a government of national unity, placing himself equidistant between the governing UMP against which his party had supported a vote of no confidence in 2006, and the Socialist Party which it had joined in that censure vote. A distant echo to Macron's presidential bid of 2017, Bayrou ran on a centrist platform claiming to operate independently from both the left and right, advocating a social liberal economic agenda, supporting European integration and pushing forward institutional reforms to renovate French politics. Bayrou also strategically adopted a more confrontational style

embedded in a 'soft' anti-establishment appeal against the "old established order" dominated by the PS and the UMP (Evans and Ivaldi 2013).

With 18.6 per cent of the vote, the 2007 race was the height of centrist presence in French presidential elections since the mid-1980s, reflecting Bayrou's popularity which peaked at 58 per cent of positive ratings on the eve of the 2007 elections, as opposed to 26 per cent five years earlier⁶. Referring back to Figure 2.4, Bayrou's candidacy came at a time when polarization of the system was at one of the all-time lows. Of course, this is partly endogenous to Bayrou's own strong performance. However, it was also the election where the two main parties of Left and Right combined more than at any other election since 1974 – some 57 per cent of the vote. A substantial proportion of Nicolas Sarkozy's vote had been won from voters potentially available to the FN, from the UMP candidate's hardline immigration and law-and-order stance (Mayer 2007). Similarly, Ségolène Royal had, to a lesser extent, secured some of the more hard Left support potentially open to the PCF or Trotskyist candidates (Michelat and Tiberj, 2007). These two centripetal tendencies on Left and Right wings ensured that the centrist support could only ensure a respectable third place.

Reformed as the *Mouvement Démocrate* prior to the 2007 legislatives, in a further explicit attempt by Bayrou to distance the party from its avowedly Right-rooted predecessor,⁷ it managed only 7.6 percent of the first round vote – still some three points more than the UDF had won after the formation of the UMP in 2002 had deprived it of some three-quarters of its candidates (Sauger, 2003: 115). Indeed, in light of Modem's much weaker performance in the 2007 legislatives – undoubtedly a negative manifestation of confirmatory elections – maintaining this level of support was seen as difficult (Sauger, 2007), and a score of less than 10 percent in 2012 suggested that the centrist peak had passed, which was corroborated by the drop in Bayrou's popularity, down to 44 per cent from 58 per cent five years earlier.

In 2017, Macron represented a viable centrist alternative, despite *En Marche!* being novel to French politics, lacking Bayrou's reputation as a *notable*. Macron's popularity was similar to that of his centrist predecessor at 40 per cent of positive ratings on the eve of the 2017 presidential election, but showing stronger political momentum and growth in support during the last months preceding the election. Macron's vote share of more than five points more than Bayrou in 2007 would therefore seem to be predicated spatially upon a heightened version of 'moderate polarisation', or centrifugal competitive dynamics among the candidates of the centre-left and centre-right. In fact, as we shall see in the next chapter, this more radicalised position for the Socialist and Republicans candidates emerged from the primary process, rather than the programmatic strategy of internally anointed candidates. However, as the Bayrou example demonstrates, centrist space is not election-winning if the flanking competitors are not challenged by their own respective radical neighbours.

2.3. Fragmentation of competition

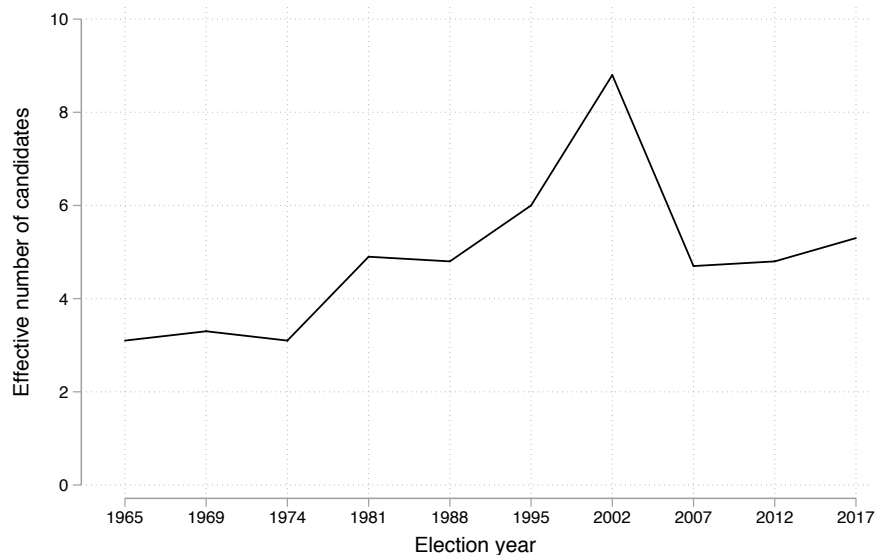
One last challenge to the stability of the party system concerns the level of fragmentation of party and candidate supply, both across the party system as a whole and within each of the two main blocs of the left and right. In party system classification terms, the total number of parties matters (Sartori 1976: ##). Where limited pluralism has in general between three and five relevant parties, more than five is characteristic of extreme pluralism. As Figure 2.5 illustrates, the 2002 presidential election was

⁶ TNS-Kantar political popularity trends, http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=2&code_nom=bayrou

⁷ For this reason, we do not consider the 1995 candidacy of the RPR's Edouard Balladur, supported by the UDF, as in any way centrist – Balladur was a 'classic' candidate of the social conservative Right, splitting the Right-wing vote between himself and Jacques Chirac.

the only time when the effective number of candidates surpassed this threshold, showing 8.8 candidates⁸, a number which was nevertheless significantly reduced in the legislative elections that followed, down to 5.2 candidates, setting a benchmark for average levels of fragmentation in post-presidential ‘confirmatory’ legislative races after 2002.

Figure 2.5 Effective number of candidates in presidential elections since 1965



Source: Ministry of the Interior official results; authors’ own calculations

Fragmentation of the party system as a whole is dependent upon the presence and relative size of all parties, centrist and radical, across the spectrum, together with more traditional parties of the mainstream. As such, fragmentation must be regarded as a trait rather than a driver of change. Returning to Figure 2.5, the total level of party system fragmentation in 2017, with 5.3 effective presidential candidates, was not substantially higher than the two previous editions in 2012 and 2007 at 4.8 and 4.7 parties, respectively. The effective number of parties or candidate may reflect some very different configurations, however.⁹ In the 2017 election, the value of 5.3 captures primarily four main candidates of roughly equal size – Macron, Le Pen, Fillon and Mélenchon – plus Hamon and the rest of the more minor candidates, which account for the additional fifth ‘theoretical’ party.

More importantly, perhaps, the size of fragmentation within each bloc suggests that both the Republicans and the Socialists were strongly challenged by their more radical competitor in 2017, Hamon even more so than Fillon. As Table 2.4 illustrates, in the two previous elections of 2007 and 2012, the PS had secured over 70 per cent of the left-wing vote, a relative vote share which fell down

⁸ We refer here to the standard measure of the Effective Number of parties (ENP) proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979), which takes into account both the number of parties and their relative weights. In this book, the ENP is also used for the effective number of candidates in primary and presidential elections. As Taagepera and Shugart (1989) suggest, the ‘effective number of parties’ index should not be used as a proxy for the actual number of competitors, as it primarily conveys information about fragmentation.

⁹ See Michael Gallagher on this – (https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/EISystems/Docts/effno.php).

dramatically to 23 per cent in 2017, however. Similarly, in 2017, the balance of power within the right pole of French politics shifted towards the FN, splitting the right-wing vote in two with Fillon securing only 48 per cent, as opposed for instance to 60 and 75 per cent for Sarkozy in 2012 and 2007, respectively. Thus, in 2017, the redistribution of power within each ideological pole attested to the electoral decline of their mainstream components, expanding the political space available to Macron at the centre, which was a crucial factor of his success in the presidential.

Table 2.4 Balance of power between mainstream and radical presidential candidates by bloc (2002-2017)

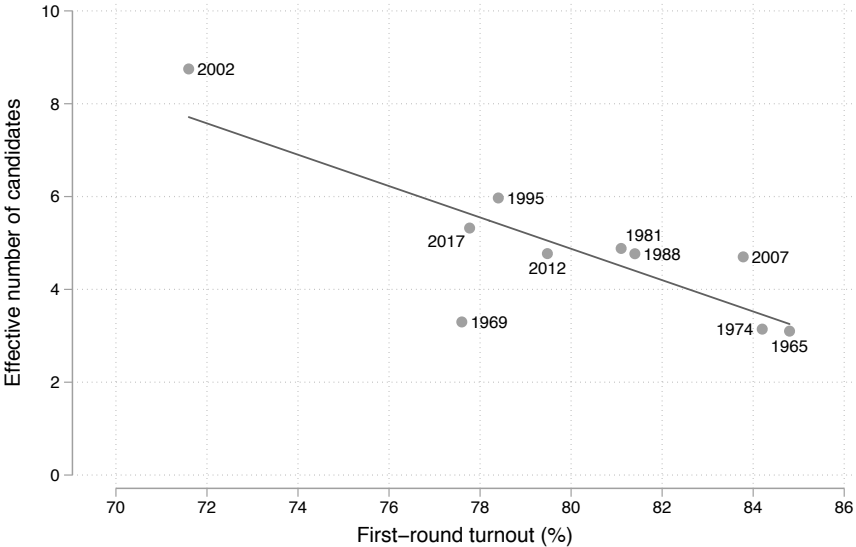
	2002	2007	2012	2017
Left				
Mainstream	55.4	75.3	70.3	23.0
Radical	44.6	24.7	29.7	77.0
Right				
Mainstream	50.9	74.9	60.3	48.4
Radical	49.1	25.1	39.7	51.6

% total presidential candidate vote share
 Source: authors’ calculations from official result, Ministry of the Interior

Finally, it is worth considering the status of voter turnout, which, whilst clearly not a systemic property of the party system, is nonetheless closely linked with the competitive dynamics of French presidential elections, particularly with regard to the number of candidate, or fragmentation of its party supply. As Parodi (1997: 299) argues, French presidential elections became increasingly ‘proportionalized’ and fractionalized over time, a trend which was to continue until 2007, mostly as a result of the development of second-order elections held under proportional representation, which relaxed the constraints of the dominant majoritarian framework, fostering proportionalist and more expressive behaviour amongst voters in first rounds of national elections, while also allowing peripheral parties to gain visibility and achieve political relevance. In terms of Parodi’s accordion analogy, having ‘opened’ for the second-order elections, the system does not entirely ‘close’ at subsequent first order elections.

Simultaneously with this stretching, measured by the level of fragmentation, turnout has steadily declined over the same period. As Figure 2.6 suggests, there is a strong relationship between voter participation and fragmentation in French presidentials across the 1965-2017 period, whereby a higher turnout is associated with lower fragmentation in the first round. As the 2002 election illustrates, it can be assumed that, because it primarily reflects voter discontent with the political system, lower turnout is more likely to affect its mainstream parties of government, with a relative and absolute increase of vote share for non-traditional party alternatives, most likely radical candidates, whose populist appeal is best fit to capitalize on voter distrust of ‘old’ politics. In the wake of 2002, the elections of 2007 and 2012 saw a renewed centralism of presidentialised governing party, with improved mobilisation, reducing support for other actors outside the mainstream.

Figure 2.6 Voter turnout and fragmentation of candidate supply in French presidential elections since 1965



Source: Ministry of the Interior official results; fragmentation is expressed as the effective number of candidates (see above); authors' calculations

In this regard, 2017 was not an outlier election in any sense. Candidate fragmentation was higher than average, turnout lower, in the first round, ensuring a propitious environment for a rejection of 'old' politics, as in 2002, but with the expected relationship between the two. In Parodi's formulation, the system has stretched further from 2012 and 2007, because of the impact of second-order elections in the previous cycle which we will explore further in Chapter 4. The election followed its expected trajectory, systemically. However, what the fragmentation argument cannot portray is the profound reorientation of underlying support leading to this pattern, and including a shift from governing parties to centrist challenger.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified three major challenges to the bipolar stability of the French party system, namely the consolidation of radical challengers, the fragmentation of party supply and the emergence of a viable centrist alternative. The first two challenges appear to be essential conditions of challenge to the competitive status quo. These challenges have varied over time, however, and they have played out differently across French presidential elections since 2002. Based on the data in this chapter, the variation in the impact of each of those factors on the party system can be summarized in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 A diagnostic summary of the three main challenges to the French party system since 2002

	2002	2007	2012	2017
Size of radical vote	+	-	+	++
Credible centrist alternative	-	++	+	+
Fragmentation	++	-	-	+

As can be seen, the 2017 diagnostics provided the most favourable set of opportunities: it is only in 2017 that systemically all three parameters were sufficiently strong to result in the foundations being laid for a structural transformation of the party system. In contrast, in 2007, a potentially stronger centrist candidate – at least in terms of Bayrou’s all-time high popularity besting that of Macron in 2017 – failed to disrupt the bipolar dynamics of the presidential race, specifically lacking the opportunities that would be produced by the other two parameters, in an election which was marked with lower fragmentation and reasonably sized radical challengers. A similar conclusion applies to the 2012 election, where the radical vote increased significantly from 2007, yet failing to produce a centrist win as fragmentation did not augment substantially, while Bayrou had also lost some of his political lustre. Finally, looking back at the ‘earthquake’ election of 2002, the structure of opportunity was certainly ripe for change, showing high fragmentation and a sizeable radical vote, yet, at the time, Bayrou would simply not represent the credible centrist alternative that he would later embody in the 2007 and, to a lesser extent, 2012 presidentials.

Overall, the party system array at the end of the 2017 presidential elections could be characterised as in limbo. Four equal strength candidates, of very different ideological blocs, suggests a high level of polarisation, and the fragmentation of the system, increased on 2007 and 2012, strongly suggests a move towards a higher number of actors across a wide ideological spread. However, looking beyond the drivers of this situation, which we consider over the next half-a-dozen chapters, the result of the presidential election does not give a clear indication of a realignment, but rather of a dealignment in progress. As perhaps might seem predictable given the label ‘party system’, the even partial resolution of this alignment would not be visible until the end of the legislative elections. The drivers which we turn to in the next chapters, then, can be regarded as the stimuli for dealignment, peaking at the end of the first round of the presidential race.

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