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Notebook

Normalising the French presidency: explaining François Hollande's victory

Jocelyn Evans

Introduction

François Hollande's victory in the 2012 presidential elections marked a return to the Elysée Palace for the Socialist Party for the first time since 1995, and a second cycle of alternation away from a right-wing President. Hollande is only the second left-wing President under the Fifth Republic, following François Mitterrand. For the three previous presidential races – 1995, 2002 and 2007 – many Socialists felt that victory had been achievable, not least in 2002 when their candidate Lionel Jospin then failed to progress even to the second round due to an unfortunate combination of low turnout and a high number of candidates. In 2012, the left were fighting to escape the label of executive also-rans who had once again lost an election, rather than their right-wing opponents winning it.

A Hollande victory therefore struck his party and its supporters as overdue. Add to this the stalling in 2007 of the regular alternation between left and right majorities in the National Assembly which had occurred between 1981 and 2002 – a nevertheless unstable situation which could be characterised as *hyper-alternance* borne of mass political dissatisfaction (Evans and Ivaldi, 2002) – and anything other than a Socialist victory appeared unjust. With a Senate majority for the very first time, and a crushing landslide in the regional elections two years previously, all the indications were that, by June 2012, both the Elysée and the Palais Bourbon would be Socialist-controlled.

Yet the experience, not so much of 2007 and Ségolène Royal's defeat in the second round, but of 2002 and Lionel Jospin's momentous defeat in the first round of the election, led rational expectations of Hollande's victory to be tempered by irrational concerns over the power of French elections to generate 'a surprise'. A renascent extreme right, in the shape of Marine Le Pen; a centrist candidate, François Bayrou, who had run Sarkozy and Royal a close third in 2007, and who could potentially attract centre-left voters with a programme based on social liberalism and an economic *Realpolitik*; and the spectre of a disinterested, or worse, disenfranchised electorate turning out in only paltry numbers: despite all the evidence to the contrary, the suspicion of the left once more losing ground to the conservative right dogged Hollande until the eventual announcement of the winner on the evening of 6 May.

The sound foundations of a Socialist victory

In retrospect, these fears were unfounded. Marine Le Pen's challenge came only to the moderate right, at least in net effect. Despite the significant proportion of blue-collar voters she managed to attract, this represented a return to the FN electorate of the mid-1990s, an ever-smaller group in the electorate as a whole, and one no longer crucial to the Socialist's success, practically if not ideologically. Conversely, the support that her father Jean-Marie had lost to the conservative and authoritarian Sarkozy in 2007 returned disappointed in large part to the *Front national* fold, depriving the incumbent of a still-crucial tranche of voters. François Bayrou failed to match his personal best of 2007, unable to present a sufficiently persuasive alternative to what was on offer to his left, and indeed in economic terms, to his right. His apparent *ouverture* to Hollande, and his indication that he himself would vote for the Socialist in the second round, alienated many centre-right voters, and rendered his appeal to the centre-left redundant. Lastly, voters turned out in large numbers – not quite to the level of 2007, but above 80 per cent nonetheless. Electoral mathematics did not catch up with the Socialists.

Structurally, competition amongst the presidential candidates presented a number of advantages to Hollande. Firstly, the number of candidates in the race was smaller than in 2002, and even than in 2007 (Table 1).

Table 1: Candidate competition in French presidential elections (1995-2012)

	1995	2002	2007	2012
Number of candidates	9	16	12	10
Effective number of candidates	5.97	8.75	4.70	4.77

Note: the effective number of candidates or parties is formally defined as the inverse of the sum of squared individual candidate/party proportions of the vote (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

The worry of a left vote spread too thinly across too many candidates was unfounded. Looking across the left candidates, the number dropped from seven in 2007 (if José Bové is counted as of the left) to five. Of course, the absolute number of candidates does not tell us the eventual spread of vote. But, as the second row of Table 1 shows, the effective number of candidates – that is, the number of candidates weighted as a proportion of their vote (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) – was indeed much lower than 2002 and almost identical to 2007. The lessons of polarised fragmentation learnt in 2007 were remembered five years later in a return to essentially moderate bi-polar, if still ideologically distinct, pluralism.

In the lead-up to the final campaign period, initiated by the lodging of candidatures, the left bloc proved far more stable than the right. Only one withdrawal – that of Jean-Pierre Chevènement – represented a change in the gallery of candidates to the left of centre. On the right, conversely, a large number of candidates withdrew either in support of Sarkozy as a gesture to right solidarity, or because of an inability to collect the famous 500 signatures of elected representatives: Jean-Pierre Borloo, Hervé Morin, Dominique de Villepin, Christine Boutin, *inter alia*. Whilst the right painted this as mobilisation behind a

Notebook normalising the French presidency

common mainstream right candidate, which was undoubtedly an accurate description of the *political* motivation, the *competitive* effect was of unstable supply regrouping on the right, exacerbated by the strong presence of a Marine Le Pen able to garner sufficient signatures, contrasting with a stable choice-set on the left. From François Hollande's investiture as Socialist candidate on 22 October 2011, no visible challenger on the left emerged at any point during the race. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the second most successful candidate of the left, did represent an overwhelming challenge to the other radical left candidates, leaving less than 2 per cent of the first round vote between them, but pushed the Socialist candidate at most to sharpen a leftist economic agenda on pension reform and welfare support. Mélenchon's own target, not just for the presidentials, but also in his choice of her Pas-de-Calais constituency for the subsequent legislative election, was Marine Le Pen.

His ability to rally support around a 'positive' radical agenda, in stark relief to Le Pen's more exclusionary vision, may have fallen short of expectations, with a 6 per cent deficit on the *Front national* candidate. Key to Hollande's success, however, was that this support from the former Socialist Senator moved to him in the second round – a dynamic not mirrored on the right from Le Pen to Sarkozy, or indeed Bayrou to Sarkozy. In their second round survey, Ipsos estimated that 80 per cent of Mélenchon voters moved to Hollande; only 50 per cent of Le Pen's and 40 per cent of Bayrou's were similarly obliging to Sarkozy (Ipsos, '2nd tour présidentielle 2012. Comprendre le vote des Français', 3-5 May 2012).

This stability reflects the steady-state of the Socialist candidacy itself. As Clift noted in the year prior to the election, the Socialist Party threatened to derail its own challenge to the incumbent through a number of problems, including a nationally solipsistic economic programme rooted in a certain reading of the French Republican tradition, as well as an organisational structure and candidate selection process which hinder as much as help any eventual Socialist contender (Clift, 2011, 22). In fact, the party demonstrated a unity behind Hollande and exploited precisely the Socialist programmatic specificity to ensure victory. Since the setting out of the Socialist Party's programme and Hollande's own set of *60 engagements pour la France*, the key tenets of his eventual programme of government remained constant – in contrast to the frenetic 'policy-a-day' activity of Sarkozy in the last days of the campaign. At the time, Sarkozy and the UMP's rapid-response propaganda machine through traditional media and new social media such as Twitter appeared more advanced and politically attuned than the Socialists' mantra-like insistence on their programme's contents. In retrospect, their dogmatic approach demonstrated confidence. Hollande's prosaic consistency was an advantage.

Socialist unity was undoubtedly spurred on partly by the unexpected fall from grace of Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Whilst Strauss-Kahn's candidacy was never assured, the relative certainty of his victory, were he to stand in the Socialist primaries, had been confirmed by opinion polls and commentators alike. His disappearance shortly before the primaries began could have been disastrous for the Socialists. However, his relative distance from the party in his role as Director of the International Monetary Fund in New York; the distance carefully maintained by the party and its *éléphants* from their erstwhile leader-in-waiting subsequent to his being charged over the Sofitel affair; and a consequent engagement with the primary process as though DSK had never existed, allowed the party to regroup around the eventual winner.

Throughout the end of 2011 and early months of 2012, the Socialist Party showed a cohesion and programmatic coherence behind Hollande uncommon to French political parties of any hue. The defeated primary candidates fell in line behind him, Martine Aubry continuing as General Secretary and Manuel Valls playing an integral part in the campaign team for Hollande. Arnaud Montebourg, the most likely loose cannon of the group, came closest to upsetting party stability in accusing his colleagues in the Pas-de-Calais area of

RENEWAL Vol 20 No. 2/3

corrupt practice, in the process incurring the ire – and a threatened defamation suit – from Socialist grandee Jack Lang. Perhaps the most awkward, though again unproblematic, issue was Ségolène Royal's presence as a Socialist leader closely linked to the presidential candidate, but with no clear role as the outgoing presidential candidate. The promise of a safe Socialist seat in La Rochelle had turned out to be an empty one by the legislative elections, given the intransigence of the candidate ousted in her favour, but throughout the presidential race, relative silence from a normally vocal politician simply reinforced the sense of purpose behind Hollande's campaign.

President of the people: Hollande's electoral appeal

In the end, however auspicious the structure of competition and activist support for a candidate, elections are won by the voters who turn out. Socially, Hollande's first-round vote is notable by the small lead he enjoyed across all social categories, with the exception of the traditional bastions of right-wing voting: older voters, including the retired; the self-employed; and, according to the Ipsos survey immediately after the first round vote, professionals and senior managers, and voters educated to baccalaureate level (Ipsos, '1er tour présidentielle. Comprendre le vote des Français', 19-21 April 2012). This pattern is emphasised in the run-off, but the professionals and senior managers and baccalaureate group also move to a majority for Hollande (Table 2).

Table 2: Sociological profile of presidential second round electorates (2007 and 2012)

	2007			2012	
	Nicolas Sarkozy	Ségolène Royal		François Hollande	Nicolas Sarkozy
Male	54	46		52	48
Female	52	48		51	49
18-24 year olds	42	58		57	43
25-34 year olds	57	43		62	38
35-44 year olds	50	50		53	47
45-59 year olds	45	55		54	46
60-69 year olds	61	39	<i>60 plus years old</i>	41	59
70 plus years old	68	32			
Independent	82	18		30	70
Professionals, senior managers	52	48		52	48
Junior managers	49	51		60	40
Routine non-manual	49	51		56	44
Blue-collar	46	54		58	42
No qualification	51	49		59	41
Lower secondary	54	46		49	51
Baccalaureate	53	47		55	45
University / college	52	48	<i>Bac. +2</i>	50	50
			<i>Bac. +3</i>	55	45

Source: IPSOS, '2ème tour présidentielle 2007. Comprendre le vote des Français', 6 May 2007; '2ème tour présidentielle 2012. Comprendre le vote des Français', 3-5 May 2012.

Notebook normalising the French presidency

In one sense, a traditional left-right split remains in social terms. But this is not polarised. Rather than a divisive victory, the Socialist candidate was successful even in the first round in mobilising a cross-section of the French population in greater numbers than Sarkozy. As Table 2 shows, even the quintessential right social groups of independents and older voters were present proportionately in much greater numbers for Hollande than they had been for Royal five years previously. Similarly, all levels of organisational employee supported this year's Socialist candidate. Of course, the comparison is in one sense invidious for Royal, as she was the losing candidate, and so by definition would have enjoyed lower support. However, it does put into relief Hollande's victory through mobilising a cross-section of the electorate rather than entrenching successfully in the left's social milieu.

A majority of virtually all social groups clearly implies electoral victory for a candidate, but equally it explains nothing in terms of the basis for that victory. In a system which since 2002 has been characterised as increasingly two-party (Grunberg, 2007), a structure which systematically, as we have seen above, has continued in 2012, another basis for division between the electorates of Hollande and Sarkozy, of left and right, needs to be found.

It is tempting to focus upon Nicolas Sarkozy's unpopularity as a significant motivation for Hollande's victory. Commentators highlighted the apparently impossible task Sarkozy faced in fighting his way back from popularity ratings which one month before the election were at 36 per cent (Ifop, 'Indice de popularité', April 2012) and had been lower still a year before. It was certain that a failure to deliver marked economic change, as promised in 2007, combined with an unfortunately ostentatious personal style as President, would incur an electoral penalty of some magnitude. Yet the election result itself demonstrates that popularity ratings, whilst informative of the general tenor of disposition towards an incumbent, are no guide to the actual vote. Sarkozy's defeat was far from a landslide. Moreover, in terms of both candidates attracting positive and negative votes – did their supporters choose them to elect them, or to prevent the election of the other? – there was only one point difference in those voting for Hollande to prevent Sarkozy being re-elected (48 per cent) to those voting Sarkozy to prevent Hollande being elected (49 per cent) (Ifop, 'Les clés du second tours de l'élection présidentielle', 6 May 2012). As much as Hollande was elected because he wasn't Sarkozy, so Sarkozy won support to impede Hollande.

In surveys directly after the second round in May, the same differences in motivation between the respective voters of Hollande and Sarkozy emerged. Ipsos's survey asked the extent to which presidential stature, embodiment of change, and closeness to the French people mattered – presidential status mattered to 81 per cent of Sarkozy's voters, but only 17 per cent of Hollande's; change to 8 per cent of Sarkozy's voters, but 65 per cent of Hollande's. Only 9 per cent said they felt Sarkozy was close to the French, and voted for him accordingly – but Hollande similarly only managed 29 per cent (Ipsos, '2ème tour présidentielle 2012. Comprendre le vote des Français', 3-5 May 2012). The mass-elite gap which populist politicians have exploited and moderate politicians attempted to bridge is still wide. The normality of Hollande as a man, and the self-avowed mundanity which he is trying to bring to France's presidency, may differentiate him from his predecessor, but is not a sufficient condition for a successful term of office.

The expectations of Hollande, and his success, stem from his offer of change in the French system. There are multiple facets to this change: change in the presidential persona; change in the relationship between institutions and society; change in France's overseas commitments and foreign policy; change in the economic fortunes of the country. For many voters, the policy specifics and individual issue domains were of much lesser import than a broader move to replace the status quo, summarised in Hollande's campaign slogan, 'Le changement, c'est maintenant' ('Now things change'). Whatever the social

RENEWAL Vol 20 No. 2/3

profile of the voter, their decision to vote Hollande or not was taken in their belief that what the Socialist candidate offered was qualitatively superior to what Sarkozy had provided over the previous five years. Not good in absolute terms – simply better, relatively.

Conclusion

To assert that François Hollande won the 2012 presidential election because he represented the candidate for change is in one sense trivial – any non-incumbent victor may be characterised in such a fashion. The importance of ‘change’ to Hollande’s victory lies in the challenge this represents from a mass public perspective not just to the conservative right austerity of the previous UMP executive, but to the broader context of the EU response to the economic crisis. The disappearance of the awkward yet viable ‘Merkozy’ axis at the heart of the European project marked the end to an inevitably thrifty approach to rebooting EU economies. Hollande’s promise that there was an alternative to public-sector downsizing and zealous belt-tightening found sufficient ears amongst the French electorate to win him a term of office. It is of course too early to say whether it will win him a second, but already there are signs that the optimism many French voters felt about Hollande’s election is beginning to wane.

The French Central Bank’s prediction of a Q3 recession (-0.1 per cent) is unwelcome news for the new President and his government, but hardly a surprise. To expect an immediate turnaround either in GDP growth or unemployment in a small number of months would have been economically unreasonable – but from an electoral perspective, reason is only half the story. In recent opinion polls, Hollande’s June popularity ratings had dipped slightly on average. Specifically amongst the two socio-economic groups most affected by the economic crisis, namely blue-collar workers and the ‘squeezed middle’ of *professions intermédiaires* (though not white-collar employees, interestingly), greater drops of 8-9 points had occurred (Ifop, ‘Les indices du popularité’, 19-20 July 2012). 100 days into his mandate, his satisfaction ratings were down to 46 per cent. Whatever the lag in effecting economic recovery, some voters are already restless. Nevertheless, 57 per cent believe he has delivered on his campaign pledges, and amongst his own first round voters, this rises to 92 per cent (Ifop, ‘Le bilan des 100 jours de François Hollande’, 8 August 2012).

It is still hard to escape the conclusion that François Hollande and Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault’s popularity will drop further. Law-and-order issues, which beset Sarkozy’s presidency, have not gone away, as the recent riots in Amiens have shown. Europe’s future remains uncertain. Best-case scenarios for the French economy still include some recession and subsequent flat growth. Moreover, the ability of the French state to sustain measures such as the stimulus package for French car manufacturers, in the wake of PSA’s announcement of 8,000 job losses and the closure of the Aulnay-sous-Bois plant, depends heavily upon increased competitiveness and demand beyond French borders. Such a strategy was tried – largely unsuccessfully – by Hollande’s Socialist presidential predecessor in the early 1980s.

But perhaps the period prior to Mitterrand’s Socialist experiment is as instructive for the current administration. In 1978, an apparently leftist France still returned a right-wing majority in the parliamentary elections. In a seminal study seeking to explain this paradox, the key variable which emerged was *le patrimoine* – an individual’s portfolio of assets, separate from income level (Capdevielle et al., 1981). Those with higher levels of assets were more likely to support a right-wing party or presidential candidate. Recent work has confirmed that amongst holders of ‘riskier’ assets, such as shares, business interests or rental properties (Lewis-Beck et al., 2012, 54), such an effect is still at work almost 35 years later. With a programme to reduce France’s deficit including higher capital gains

Notebook normalising the French presidency

taxation, and a tax on inheritance and other assets, failure by Hollande to realise such a reduction will rapidly eat into the gains made amongst voters with such holdings. The majority of these may have voted right anyway – but a significant proportion moved to Hollande in the hope of realising change from the economic disappointment and socially illiberal doctrine of Sarkozy and the UMP. The capacity to satisfy such switchers, as well as the core support, may well determine how long this swing of the pendulum lasts.

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