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The French elections of 2017: shaking the disease?

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ABSTRACT

The results of the 2017 presidential and legislative elections represent an important shift in French politics. For the first time in the history of the 5th French Republic, the candidates of the two traditional governing parties were disqualified during the first round of the presidential elections. The duel between a centrist and a radical-right candidate in the second round of the elections constitutes an unprecedented configuration. Moreover, there was a record parliamentary renewal after the 2017 legislative elections, as well as a feminisation of the National Assembly with 38.8 per cent of women among the deputies. At the same time, abstention for the legislative elections reached a new record high. Overall, the results of the French elections in 2017 could point to major shifts in the party system, as well as to a renewal of the French political elite, and to an enduring malaise between French citizens and their political representatives.

KEYWORDS France; presidential election; legislative election; presidential election campaign; party system

Background to the election

With François Hollande becoming the seventh president of France in April 2012, the left got its second president, 24 years after François Mitterrand's second victory. His term was marked by the economic troubles in the Eurozone, terrorism and Europe's migration crisis. While François Hollande had managed to assemble the French communists, Greens and other left-wing parties to support his candidacy for the presidency, this moment of unity of the French political left did not last very long. After his victory, François Hollande quickly lost control over his presidential majority, and his presidency was overshadowed by deep internal political frictions. Many of these internal divisions in his presidential majority were

due to some of his social and economic reforms, which he put on the political agenda and/or successfully implemented.

In his five-year term, François Hollande implemented some major economic supply-side reforms, such as the tax credit for competitiveness and employment in 2012, the Responsibility and Solidarity Pact, as well as an employment reform (the El Khomri law) in 2016. Above all, this last policy reform divided his own camp and gave rise to nationwide strikes and demonstrations. The development of the French unemployment rate was the major challenge of Hollande's presidency, since he had publicly announced on several occasions that his candidacy for a second mandate would be conditioned by the decline in unemployment.

A major social and symbolic reform was the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2013, one of François Hollande's major campaign promises. The same-sex marriage reform gave rise to a highly mediated counter-movement on the right with the 'Manif pour tous' (Demo for all). This counter-mobilisation constituted an important and long-lasting anchor for the electorate of the right and far right during Hollande's presidency (Morabito and Réguer-Petit 2017). While President Hollande had politically satisfied the cultural left with the implementation of the same-sex marriage law, he challenged them with a planned reform on another very sensitive issue relating to society: a constitutional amendment in favour of the deprivation of French nationality for citizens having dual nationality. This reform project, proposed by Hollande after the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, faced major opposition from his own camp and culminated in the resignation of his minister of justice. It was finally withdrawn in March 2016 but had irreconcilably shattered the cultural left.

During Hollande's presidency, major reforms concerning French political institutions were implemented, which first came into play during the 2017 legislative elections. First of all, the financial penalties for the infringement of the 2000 parity law, a policy package targeting the gender gap in almost all levels of elected office in France, were further increased in 2014. This made the violation of gender quotas for the next legislative elections more expensive for French political parties (Achin *et al.* 2019). Another important reform for the political elite in France was the law on the 'cumul des mandats' which took effect in 2017. It legally forbids the accumulation of a parliamentary mandate and an executive mandate at the local level, which had been a very long tradition in French politics. Its implementation announced a complex interaction between national and local rationales during the post-presidential legislative elections of 2017, since it represented a potentially influential factor – amongst other factors – for the decisions of incumbents to (not) run again for a mandate in the national parliament.

The popularity of President Hollande decreased steadily throughout his presidency and changes in his cabinet did not improve things but made the profound divisions in his presidential majority even more visible. Hollande appointed Manuel Valls as the new prime minister after the debacle of the 2014 French Municipality Elections, which were a success for the radical-right National Front (Front National – FN) and an important loss for the governing left. Valls polarised the presidential majority and gave rise to further internal ‘rebels’ (*frondeurs*), including, among others, the minister of economic affairs (Arnaud Montebourg) and the minister of education (Benoît Hamon), resulting in the shortest government of the 5th Republic’s history. Shortly after, Valls formed another government which excluded the internal rebels. However, during the vote of approval of his new government, several socialist deputies abstained. The internal rebellion in the presidential majority was exacerbated by the use of the social network Twitter as an instrument of dissent, as Ecornier-Nocca and Louis-Sidois (2019) show.

Soon after his second resignation as prime minister, Valls announced that he would run in primary contests to be the Socialist candidate in the 2017 presidential elections, despite predictions that he would struggle to overcome strong dissatisfaction with his government and deep divisions on the left. The presidential primaries of the right and the left, and the victory of two rather ideologically extreme candidates, were crucial to the important shifts in French politics during the 2017 election year. The early retirement of political heavyweights such as France’s former president Nicolas Sarkozy, François Fillon (Les Républicains (LR)) at primaries of the right and the centre in December 2016, contrary to all forecasts, set the tone for the primaries of the left. Shortly afterwards, President Hollande decided not to run for a second mandate – a first in the history of the 5th Republic. The primaries of the left in January 2017 made the irreconcilable divisions of the Socialist Party (PS) even more visible by opposing followers of Hollande, such as Manuel Valls, with the so-called ‘rebels’ of the presidential majority such as Arnaud Montebourg and Benoît Hamon. The latter won as an outsider over Valls, representing an overthrow of the dominant stream in the party and thereby announcing a clear new left turn for the Socialist Party.

The internal turmoil in the two most established French political parties from the left (PS) and the right (LR) gave rise to new alliances during the presidential campaign. The creation of a new political party by Emmanuel Macron, Hollande’s former minister of the economy, challenged the bipolar format of the French party system (Grunberg and Haegel 2007). His new party ‘La République En Marche’ (LREM) assembled politicians from the left and the right, activists from civil society as well as from

the private sector. LREM was set up one year before the presidential elections, at a time when a victory for LREM's leader and candidate Emmanuel Macron, who had never held elected office and disposed of no established party-political support, seemed highly unlikely. However, Emmanuel Macron seems to have benefited from the disruptions of the two major French political parties, a general electoral context with a popular aspiration for political renewal, and an antipathy for established parties and elites (Dolez and Laurent 2018; Evans and Ivaldi 2017; Mény 2017). Indeed, the elimination of two potential serious opponents to Macron, Alain Juppé (LR) and Manuel Valls (PS), left the political centre to Emmanuel Macron and his new ally MoDem (Mouvement Démocrate). Moreover, in the course of the presidential campaign, several members belonging to the Socialist Party's centrist section, amongst others Manuel Valls, spoke out in favour of Emmanuel Macron (LREM) rather than for the PS candidate Benoît Hamon. A similar schism, even though to a lower degree, could be seen in the case of France's largest right-wing party, the Republicans. On the far left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's movement 'Unsubmissive France' (La France Insoumise (FI)), also set up only one year before the elections, equally benefited to some extent from the turmoil among the governing left.

In the light of the centre & right's as well as of the left's surprising results, with the victory of two outsiders, the internal turmoil of France's two largest political players in presidential elections (PS and LR), and the entry of two new political movements (LREM and FI) into the presidential race, the 2017 presidential campaign took place in a very unusual political context. While at the beginning of 2016, a large number of experts and the media still expected a duel between the former president Nicolas Sarkozy (LR) and the current president Hollande (PS) or Marine Le Pen (FN), this scenario completely collapsed in the course of the campaign. The singularity of the 2017 French presidential elections was that four major candidates were considered to have good prospects for qualifying for the second round: François Fillon (LR), Marine Le Pen (FN), Emmanuel Macron (LREM) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (FI). This indicated a deeply fragmented political space and announced a paradigmatic shift in the party competition in French politics.

Campaign issues

One of the most prominent themes of the campaign concerned the wish for political renewal and a certain fatigue with the traditional political elite in France and their lack of representativeness and transparency. One of the principal triggers for the debate around these issues was a scandal that emerged quite early on around the candidate for the right, François

Table 1. Issue salience in %.

Issue	2017
Unemployment	48
Terrorism	13
Inequality	9
Deficits	8
Crime	7
Global warming	6
Taxes	5
Immigration	4
<i>N</i>	1830

Note: The table entries are based on data from the Post-Election Survey of the French Election Study 2017 (Gougou and Sauger 2017) and on the following survey question: 'Which are the most important issues for France nowadays?' (*Toujours à propos de ces thèmes, quel est le plus important pour la France aujourd'hui?*). Respondents could only choose between those eight issues, which in turn means that there could have been other important issues for French citizens which they have not been asked about. Data are not weighted.

Fillon, and his alleged misuse of public funds by creating 'fake jobs' for his family members. François Fillon's campaign took a sharp downturn: while in January 2017 he was among the strongest and most likely candidates in the presidential race, his scandal became the main focus and resulted in a devastating presidential campaign for LR (Mény 2017). While Fillon ignored the media, public opinion and party pressure and refused to withdraw from the race, his public image was irreversibly damaged. The Fillon scandal further divided the Republicans between those who still supported Fillon's candidacy and a growing fraction which pushed forward demands for a new candidate or migrated to the Macron camp.

In contrast to what could have been expected and what had been observed in other West European electoral contexts in 2017 (Aardal and Bergh 2018),¹ immigration was not a top priority during the campaign in France. The most important issue was unemployment, followed by terrorism and inequality (see Table 1). Indeed, the 2017 campaign was mostly run on socio-economic issues. Even Marine Le Pen chose to focus on economic issues, as did other candidates. These socio-economic issues had also been related much more to a debate about the role of the European Union. While the topic of European integration is on the whole traditionally absent or under-discussed in French political debate, it was important during the 2017 campaign. The debate on that issue was mostly structured by three candidates: the pro-European Macron, and Mélenchon and Le Pen who adopted a critical stance towards the European Union (Schön-Quinlivan 2017). It was precisely this line of cleavage which Emmanuel Macron used to structure his campaign. The TV debate in between the two rounds of the presidential elections focused, above all, on the issue of European integration.

Moreover, the presidential and the legislative campaigns took place while the country was still under the state of emergency and marked by terrorist attacks. Terrorism and internal security were hence important issues during the campaign and in TV debates. News of the shooting on the Champs-Élysées on 20 April even came up during a TV debate and gave all presidential candidates the opportunity to lay out their positions on the issue.

Women were largely absent from the primaries and presidential campaign – which in itself is not a new but rather a quite common feature of French presidential campaigns (Achin and Lévêque 2017). Only 2 out of 11 candidates were women, one being a candidate on the far left (Nathalie Arthaud) and the other being Marine Le Pen (FN) as the candidate of the far right. The latter was the female candidate who received the most media attention but also had the least feminist programme (Achin and Lévêque 2017). Marine Le Pen has presented herself as a modern woman and, in contrast to her father's deliberately sexist and masculine rhetoric, has emphasised her identity as a divorced and remarried mother and has welcomed gay members to the party to establish the idea that the FN was breaking with its past. However, by the end of the presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen had achieved several failures. While she was first mocked in social media for plagiarising a former speech of François Fillon, her party further confounded its electorate with unclear comments about whether France should stay in the Eurozone or not. The TV debate on 3 May 2017 in between the two rounds of the presidential elections was something of a disaster for Marine Le Pen, who appeared particularly aggressive and rude toward Emmanuel Macron, contradicting the calm and softer image that her 'detoxification' strategy had sought to create.

The results

Presidential elections 2017

France has a two-round electoral system. In 2017, the two rounds of the French presidential elections took place on 23 April and 7 May. The candidate who gets above 50% of the overall national popular vote is elected president for a five-year term. A candidate could potentially win in the first round of voting, but given that there are usually more than just two candidates this is highly unlikely.

Tables 2 and 3 provide the results of the presidential elections. The level of abstention (22.2%) was the second highest for the first round of a French presidential election in the 5th Republic. However, with 77.8% of registered voters going to the ballots during the first round of the

Table 2. The French presidential elections: first round results.

	Votes	%
Emmanuel Macron	8,656,346	24.01
Marine Le Pen	7,678,491	21.30
François Fillon	7,212,995	20.01
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	7,059,951	19.58
Benoît Hamon	2,291,288	6.36
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan	1,695,000	4.70
Jean Lassalle	435,301	1.21
Philippe Poutou	394,505	1.09
François Asselineau	332,547	0.92
Nathalie Arthaud	232,384	0.64
Jacques Cheminade	65,586	0.18
Blank ballots	659,997	1.78
Abstention	10,578,455	22.23

Note: Percentages are based on votes cast.

Source: Conseil constitutionnel.

Table 3. The French presidential elections: second round results.

	Votes	%
Macron Emmanuel	20,743,128	66.10
Le Pen Marine	10,638,475	33.90
Blank ballots	3,021,499	8.52
Abstention	12,101,366	25.44

Note: Percentages are based on votes cast.

Source: Conseil constitutionnel.

presidential elections, this still represents a comparatively high electoral mobilisation.

As announced by French polls before the elections, the race was very close with quite small gaps between the scores of the four main candidates. Emmanuel Macron became the winner of the first round of French presidential elections with 24.01% of the votes. Marine Le Pen obtained the highest share of votes for a far-right candidate at a French presidential election with 21.3% of the votes, allowing the National Front to reach the runoff, like her father in 2002. Marine Le Pen is consequently the second woman in France after Ségolène Royal to have qualified for the second round of the presidential elections. Disqualified from the runoffs were the two candidates of the traditional governing parties of the left and the right. The Republicans' presidential candidate, François Fillon, missed qualifying for the second round by a small margin, with 20.01% of the votes. The defeat is much clearer for the main candidate of the former governing socialist party, Benoît Hamon, who finished at a record low for the PS (6.36%), which did not come as a surprise after the turmoil and deep fragmentations in the party. However, the very low score and the fact that the PS lost former political strongholds to Emmanuel Macron and Jean-Luc Mélenchon indicated that the PS had been abandoned by a significant part of its core electorate. While Jean-Luc Mélenchon could not qualify for the second round, he became, with 7,059,951 votes and

thus 70% of left-wing votes, unquestionably the clear winner of the French left (Cautrès 2017: 177).

The second round of the presidential elections saw the level of abstention grow by around three percentage points, which is rather unusual. Historically, turnout has tended to increase between the two rounds. This might have been due to the lower competitiveness of the election (creation of the so-called 'front républicain', i.e. the determination of a great majority of the French electorate to keep the radical right out of power and the call of many disqualified candidates to vote against the FN candidate) and the absence of a left-wing competitor, since a large fraction of left-wing voters declined to choose between Macron and Le Pen (Gougou and Persico 2017: 306). This led to a significant increase in blank ballots, from 1.78% during the first round to 8.52% during the runoffs.

In terms of results, the outcome of the runoffs was clearer than expected: Emmanuel Macron won with 66.1% of the votes and, at 39, became the youngest ever French president. This also makes him the first candidate to win the French Presidency without being elected for office before and without support from established political parties. The so-called 'front républicain' played in favour of Macron, since the majority of the electorate supporting Fillon, Mélenchon and Hamon, who voted in the second round, voted for Emmanuel Macron.² However, Macron's score and a lower turnout, as well as a higher proportion of blank ballots, also confirms that the 'front républicain' has weakened since the historical electoral earthquake when Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen were the contenders in the second round of the presidential elections of 2002 (Miguet 2002). The score of 33.9% was rather disappointing for Marine Le Pen, who had allied with Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France) in between the two rounds to attract a larger electorate on the right. Her poor performance during the last television debate, as well as the FN's ambiguous position towards the European monetary system, might partly explain her defeat. However, her score is still two times higher than that of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2002 when he obtained 17.79% of the votes in the second round of the presidential elections (see also Miguet 2002). Furthermore, Marine Le Pen succeeded, as in 2012, in conquering part of the female electorate, thereby breaking with the radical right gender gap that prevailed during Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership of the FN (Amengay *et al.* 2017; Marchand-Lagier 2018; Mayer 2015).

Overall, the results of the 2017 French presidential elections indicate major shifts in the structure of the French party system. The closeness of the presidential race between the four main candidates points to a break with its bipolar and tripolar shapes. Indeed, since the end of the 2000s the French party system has moved towards an increasingly bipolar shape

(Gougou and Labouret 2013; Grunberg and Haegel 2007), in stark contrast to the ‘tripolar’ pattern of party competition that featured between the 1980s and the mid-2010s. This ‘tripartition’ used to be structured around one left-wing bloc, one moderate right-wing bloc and one extreme-right bloc (Bornschieer and Lachat 2009; Grunberg and Schweisguth 1997; Tiberj 2012). Yet the results of the 2017 presidential elections mark a clear break with the bipolar shape of the French party competition in the mid-2000s and also point towards the end of standard tripartition. As Gougou and Persico (2017) show, they rather indicate the creation of a new four-party system or a ‘quadripartition’ in French politics, with an eco-socialist bloc on the left, a cultural and economic liberal bloc at the centre, and two distinct poles on the right, one social-conservative and neoliberal bloc, as well as an anti-immigration and anti-globalisation bloc on the far right.

However, Emmanuel Macron’s landslide victory in the presidential elections constituted no guarantee for him to get and form a majority government after the imminent legislative elections. His party (LREM) just celebrated its first birthday and needed enough candidates to run for office in 577 districts all over France, many of which had strong local notables who had been in office for many years. Therefore, it was questionable whether Macron and LREM, even with his ally MoDem, could (once again) disrupt the bipolar shape of the French party competition in legislative elections which are much less candidate-centred and less mobilising than the presidential elections. Candidates’ profiles and previous political experience are important factors for the electoral outcomes of the legislative campaigns in France (Brouard and Kerrouche 2013), even though research points to mixed results with regard to incumbency effects in French parliamentary elections (Murray 2008). However, LREM could to some degree anticipate this kind of effect by attracting defecting incumbents from the right and the left who declared their intention to run for the presidential majority before the legislative elections.

Legislative elections 2017

There are 577 single-seat constituencies for the legislative elections in France. Every constituency directly elects one candidate as a member of the National Assembly for a five-year term. The two rounds of the French legislative elections were held on 11 and 18 June 2017, about four weeks after the presidential elections (official results are shown in Tables 4 and 5). The timing of national parliamentary elections in the electoral calendar in France is the reason why they are considered as a third and fourth round of the presidential elections (Dupoirier and

Table 4. The French legislative elections: first round results.

	2017		2012	
	Votes	Votes (%)	Votes	Votes (%)
La République en marche (LREM)	6,391,269	28.21		
Les Républicains (LR)	3,573,427	15.77	7,037,268	27.12
Front National (FN)	2,990,454	13.20	3,528,663	13.60
La France insoumise (FI)	2,497,622	11.03		
Parti socialiste (PS)	1,685,677	7.44	7,618,326	29.35
The Greens (EELV)	973,527	4.30	1,418,264	5.46
MoDem	932,227	4.12	458,098	1.77*
Union des Démocrates et Indépendants (UDI)	687,225	3.03		
Miscellaneous right (DVD)	625,345	2.76	910,034	3.51
Parti communiste français (PCF)	615,487	2.72	1,793,192	6.91**
Others	500,309	2.21	133,752	0.52
Miscellaneous left (DVG)	362,281	1.60	881,555	3.40
Debout la France (DLF)	265,420	1.17		
Regionalists	204,049	0.90	145,809	0.56
Extreme Left	175,214	0.77	253,386	0.98
Parti radical de gauche (PRG)	106,311	0.47	428,898	1.65
Extreme right	68,320	0.30	49,499	0.19
Nouveau Centre (NCE)			569,897	2.20
Parti radical (PRV)			321,124	1.24
Ecologists			249,068	0.96
Alliance centriste (ALLI)			156,026	0.60
Abstention		51.30	49,499	42.78

* In 2012, many MoDem candidates ran for 'Centre pour la France'.

** In 2012, the PCF, the 'Parti de gauche' (party of the left) and the 'Gauche unitaire' (Left united) formed a coalition of left-wing parties named 'Front de gauche'.

Note: percentages are based on votes cast.

Source: Ministry of the Interior.

Sauger 2010) and a sort of 'honeymoon' or confirmatory election, designed to secure a working parliamentary majority for the presidential incumbent. This pattern has been consolidated by the 2017 legislative elections (Evans and Ivaldi 2017).

Above all, the 2017 legislative elections were characterised by very high levels of abstention. The first round announced that 51.3% of registered voters did not go to the polls, yet one week later France experienced an all-time low in turnout for the second round of the legislative elections in the history of the 5th Republic. Not even half of the registered voters went to the polls on 18 June 2017. Even from a comparative perspective, the turnout for the French legislative elections was remarkably low (Aardal and Bergh 2018; Dinas and Rori 2013; Little 2017). Tiberj (2018: 842) finds substantial generational inequalities in the overall level of abstention in 2017: French citizens who were born 1938–1947 and 1948–1957 had a 1.3 times higher impact than their demographic weight among registered voters, whereas those who were born after 1977 had 0.7 times less importance compared to their share among registered voters. At the same time, Braconnier *et al.* (2017) demonstrate the growing social inequality in political participation levels

Table 5. The French legislative elections: second round results.

	2017			2012		
	Seats N	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats N	Votes	Votes (%)
LREM	308	7,826,245	43.06			
LR	112	4,040,203	22.23	194	8,740,628	37.95
FN	8	1,590,869	8.75	2	842,695	3.66
PS	30	1,032,842	5.68	280	9,420,889	40.91
FI	17	883,573	4.86			
MoDem	42	1,100,656	6.06	2	113,196	0.49*
UDI	18	551,784	3.04			
DVD	6	306,074	1.68	15	417,940	1.81
DVG	12	263,488	1.45	22	709,395	3.08
PCF	10	217,833	1.20	10	249,498	1.08**
Regionalists	5	137,490	0.76	2	135,312	0.59
Others	3	100,574	0.55			
PRG	3	64,860	0.36	12	538,331	2.34
The Greens	1	23,197	0.13	17	829,036	3.60
Extreme right	1	19,034	0.10	1	29,738	0.13
DLF	1	17,344	0.10			
NCE				12	568,319	2.47
PRV				6	311,199	1.35
ALLI				2	123,132	0.53
Total of MPs	577			577		
Abstention			57.36			44.60

*In 2012, many MoDem candidates ran for 'Centre pour la France'.

**In 2012, the PCF, the 'Parti de gauche' (party of the left) and the 'Gauche unitaire' (Left united) formed a coalition of left parties named 'Front de gauche'.

Note: Percentages are based on votes cast.

Source: Ministry of the Interior.

in France, which tends to be in line with evidence from other contemporary democracies (Dalton 2017).

The second characteristic of the 2017 legislative elections was similar to the presidential elections: a high level of political fragmentation. The first round featured a total of 7882 candidates, giving an average of 13.7 candidates across the 577 constituencies (Evans and Ivaldi 2017: 327). According to Evans and Ivaldi (2017: 327), there was a total of 6.8 effective parties at the 2017 legislative elections, making them more fragmented than the previous legislative campaigns of 2007 and 2012.

LREM presented itself as the clear leader and winner of the first round with 28.21% of the votes, thereby validating the institutional confirmatory effect of the French legislative elections which worked to its advantage. Its ally MoDem also more than doubled its score from the first round of 2012, with 4.12% of the votes in 2017. The Republicans experienced a major setback with 15.77% of the votes, compared to 27.12% in the first round of 2012. The Socialist Party continued its march towards its own quasi-dissolution with 7.44% of the votes compared to 29.35% in the first round of 2012. Benoît Hamon, former presidential candidate of the PS, who was defeated in his district after the first round, announced

immediately afterwards that he would leave the Socialist Party and create his own political movement. The Socialist Party's ally, the Green party (EELV), also saw its already very marginal score from 2012 (5.46%) decrease further (4.30%). While it had presented 459 candidates over 577 districts, only one candidate qualified for the second round but decided to run for the presidential majority. The results for the Green party indicate that, in contrast to developments in Germany, the Greens in France are completely marginalised. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's movement 'Unsubmissive France' (FI) recovered from its disappointment in the presidential elections with a score of 11.03% in the first round and managed to maintain 68 candidates out of 553, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself in his own district. Finally, the National Front stagnated again at about 13% of the votes, approximately the same as in the first round of the legislative elections of 2012, a further disappointment for the FN after its poor score in the second round of the presidential elections four weeks before.

The third characteristic of the 2017 legislative elections, which appeared after the first round, was the quasi-disappearance of the traditional left-right (PS vs. LR) duel and an omnipresence of the centre coalition (LREM–MoDem). As Dolez and Laurent (2018: 806) show, the traditional PS vs. LR duel shrank from 443 in 2012 to only 16 duels in the total of 577 electoral districts. LREM–MoDem imposed itself as the hub and pivot of the second round with three types of duels: LREM–MoDem vs. the Right in 273 districts, LREM–MoDem vs. the Left in 135 districts and LREM–MoDem vs. the extreme right in 103 districts (Dolez and Laurent (2018)). As Dolez and Laurent (2018) state, while the National Front has disrupted the left-right cleavage in France over the last 30 years, the landslide victory of Emmanuel Macron has completely devastated it.

With 43.06% of the votes LREM was the clear winner of the second round of the legislative elections and with 308 seats secured the absolute majority, fixed at 289 seats for the National Assembly. However, it gained a much lower number of parliamentary seats than the more than 400 seats the polls had projected, which seems to be due to the demobilisation of its own electorate and a higher mobilisation of the electorates of the other political forces in the second round (Dolez and Laurent 2018). Together with its ally MoDem, which won an unprecedented number (42) of seats, it obtained 49.12% of the votes in the second round of the legislative elections. Overall, the results show that LREM took advantage of its position at the centre of the political spectrum and of the French electoral two-round system, which gave its candidates the opportunity to cross-cut the traditional bipolar, left-right divide by attracting moderate voters from both poles.

The score of 22.23% and thus 112 seats in the newly elected parliament represented a major setback for the traditional governing party from the right (LR). However, it allowed the LR to remain the main opposition party. The other traditional governing party from the left (PS) could not expect much after the first-round result. The small share of the votes (5.68%) and the low number of seats (30) in the National Assembly did not surprise anybody. The National Front gained for the first time eight seats in the national parliament with a score of 13.20% but missed its objective of forming a parliamentary group in the National Assembly, which needs 15 elected members. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 'Unsubmissive France', however, was able to form a parliamentary group, with a score of 4.86% and 17 elected members.

With regard to the composition of the newly elected National Assembly, there was a substantial parliamentary renewal after the 2017 legislative elections. According to Boelaert *et al.* (2018: 777), 72% of the members of the National Assembly were new, which is an unprecedented proportion in the 5th Republic. More importantly, 28% of the newly elected members of the parliament were complete political newcomers who did not have any prior political experience (Boelaert *et al.* 2018:782–783). This high share of political newcomers constitutes another important record for this new Assembly. There are at least two explanations for this renewal. The first is linked to the law prohibiting the concurrent holding of a parliamentary with a local executive mandate which was enacted during Hollande's presidency. Yet some recent research (Brouard 2017) indicates that this reform was only a secondary if not insignificant cause for this important turnaround, while admitting that it is difficult to precisely measure its impact. The second explanation points to the general wish for political renewal and a growing fatigue with the established political elite that existed among the French public in 2017. LREM made this wish for political renewal one of its major objectives during the legislative campaign. Boelaert *et al.* (2018: 783) show that LREM did indeed play an important role in the renewal of the National Assembly since 44% of its deputies are political newcomers. In the case of the FI, the other new political movement in the National Assembly, the share of political newcomers is even higher (65%) but one should remember that it only won 17 seats. However, while they are political newcomers in terms of prior political experience most of them still have, whether they are female or male, an upper-class profile, despite the general wish for 'renewal' of the French political elite (Durovic *et al.* 2018).

Linked to the issue of the parliamentary turnover is the increased feminisation of the National Assembly in 2017 (see Figure 1). As in the 2017 Norwegian parliamentary elections (Aardal and Bergh 2018), the French legislative elections also produced the highest ever share of female

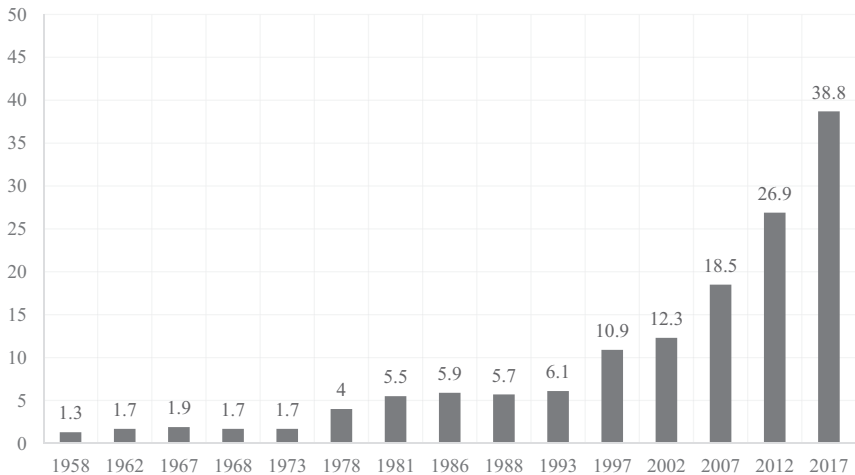


Figure 1. Female representation in the French National Assembly (%).

representatives in parliament (38.8%). Yet, in contrast to Norway, where one could observe only moderate change (Aardal and Bergh 2018), this constitutes a huge increase for France. France was the first country in the world to introduce a compulsory 50% gender parity provision. Political parties are required to ensure the equal representation of men and women on their lists of candidates for most elections. So far, the French parity law seems to have led to increasing numbers of women in French political assemblies, elected by proportional representation (municipalities, regional councils etc.) but has not significantly influenced the feminisation of the National Assembly (Achin *et al.* 2019).

Conclusion

The 2017 French presidential and legislative elections saw an atypical campaign and the landslide victory of Emmanuel Macron as well as of his governing majority, composed of his own party (LREM) and MoDem. These two elections broke several records and even brought into question some of the very features of the French party system. At the same time, the results of the 2017 legislative elections point to some stability with regard to typical institutional mechanisms. First, there is the confirmatory effect of the legislative elections which proved once again beneficial to the winner of the presidential elections. Second, they also attest to the high disproportionality of the French electoral system. As Dolez and Laurent (2018: 815) show, the level of disproportionality of the new National Assembly (in terms of votes and seats) seems to attest that a two-round system produces one of the most disproportional results in occidental

democracies. Indeed, while party competition in France is becoming increasingly ‘quadripolar’ (Gougou and Persico 2017), the effective number of parliamentary parties in 2017 appears, with those of 2002, to be at its lowest point since 1958 (Dolez and Laurent 2018: 815), highlighting an important disequilibrium in parliamentary representation in France. This feature of the French electoral system may, in the light of the recent ‘Yellow Vests’ protest movement, become a more salient issue for public opinion in France, as well as for the so-called crisis of representative democracy.

Notes

1. Other recent reports in the elections in context series include van Holsteyn (2018) and Prosser (2018).
2. IPSOS (2017). *Sociologie des Electorats et Profil des Abstentionnistes*. <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/2nd-tour-presidentielle-2017-sociologie-des-electorats-et-profil-des-abstentionnistes> (accessed 28 February 2019).

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