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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

Europe Program

2017 | No.01

THE RISE OF THE FRONT NATIONAL

Taking Stock of Ten Years of French Mainstream Politics

MARTIN QUENCEZ AND MARTIN MICHELOT

FOREWORD BY TIMO LOCHOCKI



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SUMMARY:

The growing influence of the Front National (FN) in French politics and the explanations for its success are playing a pivotal role in the upcoming 2017 French elections. Favorable economic and political contexts and a successful rebranding of the party are often emphasized to explain the current situation. However, the role of mainstream parties, and especially that of the two previous failed presidencies, has been largely underestimated.

This paper argues that although Marine Le Pen's internal strategy to transform the party's image and to design a coherent anti-liberal project has increased its influence in the French political landscape, its seemingly unstoppable rise is best understood by the ability of the FN to take advantage of four key conditions. First, its anti-establishment discourse has thrived due to the general lack of clear political alternatives; second, anti-liberal promises made by mainstream parties have not been delivered; third, the FN has managed to appear as a victim of the media system; finally, the depreciation of the presidential function during the last ten years has weakened the traditional bipartisanship and helped the FN emerge as a credible alternative.

Even if the FN does not come to power in this election, it is likely to become the main menace in the French political system during the next presidency. Mainstream parties must understand their recent failures in order to avoid a deeper political crisis in the next five years.

Foreword

By Timo Lochocki

At least since the victory of Donald Trump, right-wing populism seems on the march in the Western world. Commentaries consider far right parties as a constitutive element of democratic order and root their analysis with the fascist parties in Italy and Germany that rose after World War I. However, these historical comparisons are not a helpful analytical tool because the literature on far right parties distinguishes two main groups: right-wing **extremist** parties and right-wing **populist** parties. The first are defined by clear-cut anti-democratic elements and ethnic nationalism. Their aim is to overthrow democratic order and define citizens only along ethnic ancestry lines. The most prominent contemporary example for the German case is the NPD — the National Democratic Party, which in the last election only received 1.3 percent of the vote. The parties that are currently thriving in the West belong to the second group of right-wing populist parties. Instead of anti-democratic, these are anti-elite movements that do not seek to replace democracy with an authoritarian system. Instead of campaigning on ethnic nationalism, they are basing their idea of national belonging on cultural racism. Instead of biological heritage, a very narrowly demarcated set of values and customs is defining who can belong to the nation. In this sense, they are not anti-democratic, but anti-liberal.¹ The recently rising Alternative for Germany (AfD) fits this description, as does the Front National (FN) in France, and the U.K. Independence Party in Great Britain.

These parties base their electoral appeal in two prime campaign topics: firstly, in attacking the political establishment as being united against the common man, appealing to **anti-establishment** sentiments; and secondly, in accusing these elites of not protecting the alleged core values of the nation, speaking to voters who hold very social-conservative, in parts authoritarian, **anti-liberal** values. Their winning formula reads: **“against the elite, for the nation.”**

Both party families need three main scope conditions in order to thrive:²

1) A political discourse that is receptive to **anti-establishment messages**. More voters consider the elites being united if they agree on rather contentious economic issues, such as reforms of the welfare state, taxes, or pension system. In turn, polarization over economic politics hampers the thriving of anti-establishment rhetoric. Because voters then consider elites as competing for the best innovative solution to voters’ concerns. It fits the bill perfectly that the most successful right-wing populist parties in Western Europe arose during economically very prosperous times (e.g. in Scandinavia in the 1980s, in Austria in the 1990s, the Netherlands in the 2000s, and recently in Germany). In turn, it comes as no surprise that countries hit hardest by austerity politics, see either no right-wing populists rising (Ireland, Spain, Portugal) or see little growth in already existing right-wing populists (Italy and Greece).

“ **The winning formula of right-wing populist parties currently thriving in the West reads ‘against the elite, for the nation.’** ”

2) **Anti-liberal messages** of far right parties are better received by Western European voters if moderate parties have promised social-conservative and even illiberal policies, but instead implemented rather liberal policies (e.g. asylum policy or migrant integration matters such as promising to limit immigration, but then not doing so). Then conservative voters are mobilized, but disappointed by established actors. Consequently, these occasions present a new actor with the opportunity to promote its social-conservative agenda without having been tested. Unlike established parties that have needed to make compromises while governing, new parties are not tainted by past overpromising and under-delivering. The best examples are the rise of the British UKIP and the German AfD. Both parties emerged over the last few years after leading conservative politicians promised a nationalist agenda on which they could not deliver. In the U.K., the Tories promised a brand-new bargain with the EU that

² For an overview of these factors, see:

Arzheimer, K. and E. Carter (2006). “Political opportunity structures and right-wing extremist party success.” *European Journal of Political Research* 45: 419-443.

Bornschieer, S. (2010). “The New Cultural Divide and the Two-Dimensional Political Space in Western Europe.” *West European Politics* 33(3): 419-444.

Ellinas, A. (2010). *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe: Playing the Nationalist Card*. Cambridge, University Press.

Rydgren, J. (2007). “The Sociology of the Radical Right.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33: 241-262.

¹ Takis, Pappas (2016): *Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias, March 2016.

they could not deliver; and in Germany, the CDU/CSU announced that Germany's economic contribution to the stabilization of the Eurozone would remain minor.

3) Once national debates turn into a direction that benefits these anti-establishment and anti-liberal narratives, **media access** of far right parties turns out to be the third pivotal variable for their electoral advances. Before social media came to prominence, support of leading newspapers and TV stations were key in explaining the rise of Berlusconi's Forza Italia or the early advances of the French FN.

In any country, these three conditions will be complemented or encumbered by the **institutional scope conditions** and political culture. In France specifically, as we will see below, the recent developments in the political environment clearly fit two of the three theoretical conditions for the rise of a populist far-right party, but a fourth key factor should also be taken into account. In the semi-presidential system that places a heavy burden on the person who occupies the position of president, the evolution of the role and exercise of the presidency during the last two presidencies also helps to explain how mainstream politics and their representatives have been delegitimized and the FN has emerged as a credible alternative to traditional bipartisanship.

Introduction

Nationalist and populist parties in Europe have been steeply on the rise since 2000s and the 2010s, and mainstream political parties have struggled to find a response. The rise of these parties takes place in a context of continued economic uncertainty, a deteriorating security situation brought forth by an aggressive Russia, international terrorism, and the unmet challenge of the migration and refugee crisis, and among a political class who no longer believes that the European Union is bringing prosperity. In most European countries, these so-called "anti-establishment" movements have tried to appear as the only alternative to what is framed as a corrupt and inadequate political system, captured by mainstream parties that work against the people to protect the political status quo and defend their narrow interests.

In this complicated economic and geopolitical situation, the challenge of staving off the rise of populism has been nowhere more acute than in France. Indeed, the Front National (National Front, hereafter FN) has been able, in the past ten years, to become a true

and lasting challenge to the two main traditional political forces, the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, hereafter PS) and Les Républicains (successor party to the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, or UMP, since May 2015, hereafter LR). The two traditional parties have alternated in power since the first major showing of the FN at a presidential election in 2002. In that April 2002 election then-party leader Jean-Marie Le Pen became the first FN candidate to reach the second round of a presidential election, coming in ahead of the Socialist Party candidate in the first round. This victory became seminal in the history books of those buoyed by the disaffection of French voters for the PS and LR and a structured program of *dédiabolisation*,³ or political normalization, the FN hopes to produce an even stronger showing in the presidential and legislative elections of 2017. For the past five years, since the election of President François Hollande, the 2017 election has been sharply at the focus, also financially, of the party's strategy.

Polls in the past two years have regularly put the FN at least in the second round of the presidential elections in April; the latest numbers in February have FN polling at 27 percent, and the next two candidates are polled at 18-20 percent. The candidate of the Socialist party is at 12 percent.

As a result, all of Europe is warily watching France, as the next country where nationalist forces could gain power. A stronger influence in France of the FN would undoubtedly affect France's position as one of the main drivers of European integration, but a strong FN showing has symbolic power as well. As one of Europe's most structured nationalist parties, wielding a considerable amount of influence on the domestic scene, the FN undoubtedly represents a model for other European nationalists, a fact symbolized by the current president of the FN and future candidate for the party in the 2017 presidential elections Marine Le Pen's co-leadership of the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group in the European Parliament. A strong showing of the FN in the 2017 electoral period could lead to improved results — and influence — for other nationalist parties in Europe, notwithstanding the positive dynamics that the FN has created.

To understand the progressive rise of the FN one must also think critically about the way mainstream parties have governed France in the past ten years. While Marine Le Pen's internal strategy — the so-called *dédiabolisation* — to transform the party's image by excluding its most openly racist and controversial elements, and to reject the traditional liberal economic program of her father, has played a role in the normalization of the FN in the French political landscape. The apparently unstoppable rise of the

³ Literally, "undemonization."

FN first stems from the weakening of the traditional tools that have enabled in the past mainstream parties to discredit and marginalize the far-right party. Therefore, this paper will focus on an assessment of the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and the ongoing presidency of François Hollande (since 2012) to analyze the mechanics of the rise of the FN, and then provide prospective thoughts on the 2017 elections.

The French “*Alternance*”: Is There No Alternative?

The constitution of the French Fifth Republic, drafted in 1958 under the unique circumstances of the Algerian War, was meant to overcome the political blockages of the parliamentary regime of the Fourth Republic by establishing a semi-presidential regime. The important role of the president, seen as the key pillar to ensure the stability of the regime, was based on the model of the *homme providentiel* of the Gaullist tradition, designed to provide strong majorities to a strong leadership, making the country more governable. This constitutional framework, in addition to the electoral code which limits the multiplication of smaller political movements, has helped consolidate bipartisanship in France.⁴

The political life of the Fifth Republic has been gradually structured around the notion of *alternance*, for example the shift of power from the main conservative right-wing party — today *Les Républicains* — that traditionally intends to continue the Gaullist political legacy and whose name has changed five times since 1958 - to the French Socialist Party which aims to bring together the different trends within the progressive and left-wing groups, and vice versa. The French Communist Party (PCF), which was the leading left-wing movement until the late 1970s, gradually lost its influence in the 1990s, paving the way to two opposing political blocs in France.⁵ The victory of the socialist François Mitterrand in the 1981 presidential elections constituted the first *alternance* after more than 20 years of right-wing presidencies and governments. During his two mandates (1981–1995), the Socialist coalition and the conservative right-wing party were alternatively in power in the parliament, as the National Assembly majority shifted successively in 1981, 1986, 1988 and

1993. In 1995, Jacques Chirac, one of the leaders of the mainstream right, won the presidential elections against the Socialist Lionel Jospin, but then the Socialists won the parliamentary elections in 1997. In 2000, the presidential mandate was reduced from seven to five years in order to make both presidential and parliamentary elections coincide and prevent political divides between the president and the parliament, *de facto* reinforcing the importance of the presidential elections in the French political system. The mainstream right won the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections and the following parliamentary elections, while the Socialist came back to power in 2012, when François Hollande became the seventh elected president of the Fifth Republic. In total, between 1981 and 2017, the regular shift from one bloc to another has increasingly become the symbol of a stalemate in the French democratic system.⁶ The *alternance* therefore has come to embody a negative form of continuity as the change of government does not lead to a change of policy. The outstanding desire to see new political figures and ideas emerge – in January 2016, 88 percent of the electors said they wanted a “total renewal of the political class” and 75 percent did not want Nicolas Sarkozy or François Hollande to be elected president in 2017⁷ — is the best illustration of the general rejection of traditional political offers.

The failure of the *alternance* corresponds to the first condition of the rise of populism in France, as it is key to understanding the success of the “anti-system” rhetoric of the Front National. Since its creation in 1972, the FN has shown a remarkable sense of ideological flexibility: pro-European and ultra-liberal on economic issues in the 1980s, its president, Jean-Marie Le Pen, wanted then to be perceived as a “French Reagan.” The target of his attacks changed with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the communist threat: Brussels and the European project became the new enemy of the far-right party.⁸ When Marine Le Pen took the head of the party in 2011, she again transformed its discourse to embrace a protectionist and anti-liberal program on economic affairs, which particularly suited her desire to appeal to the working-class voters.

Throughout its history however, the FN has kept the same binary vision of the French society: the cosmopolitan elites, which serve the interests of lobbies and minorities, versus

4 For more information on the construction of bipartisanship under the French Fifth Republic, see Gérard Grundberg and Florence Haegel, *La France vers le bipartisme ? La présidentialisation du PS et de l'UMP*, Presses de Sciences Po (P.F.N.S.P.), 2007.

5 Gérard Grundberg, Florence Haegel, “Le bipartisme imparfait en France et en Europe”, *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, 14(2), 2007, p337.

6 In January 2016, only 31 percent of French population declared that “democracy was working correctly in France”. See Cevipof, Baromètre de la confiance politique - vague 7 ; January 17th, 2016 <http://www.cevipof.com/fr/le-barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof/rapports/insatisfaction-1/>.

7 “Sondage : 74 percent des Français ne souhaitent pas la candidature de Hollande et Sarkozy”, *Le Parisien*, January 1st 2015 <http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/sondage-pour-88-des-francais-la-classe-politique-ne-se-renouvelle-pas-assez-01-01-2016-5415081.php>.

8 Dominique Albertini, “Quand le Front National était pro-européen”, *Libération* June 25th, 2016 http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/06/25/quand-le-front-national-etait-pro-europeen_1461803.

the national interests of the French people. The historic domination of the same two mainstream political blocs has given credence to the idea of a cohesive political establishment that shares responsibility for the deterioration of the socio-economic situation. In the beginning of the 2000s, Jean-Marie Le Pen coined the term “UMPS” to unite the two main parties — the conservative UMP and the PS — into one single political entity.⁹ The expression soon became a common term used to describe the so-called “system,” and underplay any political differences between mainstream parties.¹⁰ This simple slogan presented a simply vision of the French political landscape:

“ **The alternance from one mainstream party to another is politically irrelevant, as both the two blocs will continue to implement the same solutions.** ”

the system serves the same interests whether it is represented by Nicolas Sarkozy or François Hollande, and the only real alternative lies in a truly “anti-system” party. The FN managed to emerge as the most credible anti-establishment movement, using decades of “demonization” as a seal of authenticity against the “corrupt elites.”¹¹

In order to support the idea of a united “system,” the FN has primarily used three arguments. Firstly, the leaders of the FN have repeatedly stressed the similarities between the policies of the Sarkozy and Hollande governments, especially on some key issues: both mainstream parties are generally pro-European and defend a liberal vision for Europe; they have both embraced a similar narrative and responses to the 2008 global economic crisis and the European debt crisis; and they have traditionally shared similar views on foreign and security policy issues. According to the FN’s discourse, the *alternance* from one mainstream party to another is therefore politically irrelevant, as both the two blocs will continue to implement the same solutions, which have been proven to be wrong by the decline of France’s economy and influence in the world.

Secondly, the FN claims to promote a “democratic recovery” to overcome the “submission of our laws to non-democratic European authorities” as well as the institutions and the exercise of power that have aggravated the democratic deficit in France.¹² For the Front National, real democracy often means direct democracy, with the regular use of popular referendums.¹³ The references to referendums were already very present in the discourse of Jean-Marie Le Pen, and only

got stronger after Nicolas Sarkozy’s decision to sign the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 despite the rejection of the European Constitution in the 2007 referendum. The French electoral code is also perceived as undemocratic and purposefully benefits bipartism in French

politics; the promotion of the proportional system, which should enable smaller parties and movements to be represented, is therefore also justified in the name of democracy.¹⁴ Thirdly, mainstream political parties have also participated in the success of the “UMPS” slogan by cooperating in legislative and regional elections in order to prevent the FN from winning. This so-called *Front Républicain* strategy, which sees the left-wing and right-wing voting together in the second round of elections to prevent a far-right victory, is shown as evidence that the “system” acts to block the democratic process and the entrance of non-established forces.¹⁵

This binary vision of French politics, which has enabled the FN to become the leading “anti-system” party, has largely spread from the extremist or populist movements to the center. The rejection of traditional politics by the French voters has reached an all-time high in the Fifth Republic, and politicians from the mainstream parties have also embraced the anti-establishment narrative. A recent report of *France-Stratégie*, an agency of the Prime Minister’s office, highlights the general perception of policymakers as corrupt, disconnected from the people’s reality, and helpless in addressing socioeconomic challenges.¹⁶ Most candidates in the presidential primaries of *Les Républicains*

9 http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/fn/cette-france-qui-tombe-dans-les-bras-du-fn_1618575.html.

10 The FN’s official program for the 2012 presidential elections makes no reference to a specific political adversary or opposing party, but only to the UMPS. See Marine Le Pen, “Mon projet pour la France et pour le peuple,” 2012 http://www.frontnational.com/pdf/projet_mlp2012.pdf.

11 Cécile Alduy, “Chapitre 11 / Mots, mythes, médias. Mutations et invariants du discours frontiste,” in Sylvain Crépon et al., *Les faux-semblants du Front national*, Presses de Sciences Po (P.F.N.S.P.) *Académique*, 2015, p. 247-268.

12 <http://www.frontnational.com/pdf/Programme.pdf>.

13 <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/080212/17-le-fn-et-les-institutions?onglet=full>.

14 http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/elections-departementales-2015/article/2015/03/25/departementales-marine-le-pen-se-pose-en-victime-du-systeme-umps_4601320_4572524.html.

15 Interestingly, this “Front Républicain” is often more a myth than a reality <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2015/03/GOMBIN/52740>.

16 France Stratégie, *Lignes de failles, une société à réunifier*, rapport October 2016 <http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/sites/strategie.gouv.fr/files/atoms/files/rapport-lignes-de-faille-ok.pdf>

have therefore tried to distinguish themselves from the so-called “system,” despite often having assumed executive or legislative roles for years. The idea of renewal is thus central in the campaigns of both former Prime Minister (2007-2012) François Fillon, now the Republican Presidential candidate and former Minister Bruno Le Maire, candidate from the UMP. Nicolas Sarkozy has probably gone further than his adversaries in using the anti-establishment narrative of the FN. Already in 2012, campaigning for his own re-election, he “attempted to pose as the candidate of the people against the elites.”¹⁷ In 2016, he took Donald Trump’s victory as a model, insisting that “the candidates of the establishment and the media are crushed by the candidates of the people.”¹⁸ It is not only the right-of-center candidates. Former Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron similarly declared, during his first political rally, that “the people were fed up with the system,” while former socialist minister Arnaud Montebourg denounced the “contempt for the people” stemming from a “political system that is exhausted, discredited and dangerous.”¹⁹ However, such positions have helped legitimize the vision of the FN and have not weakened its popular support, as shown by the latest polls showing Marine Le Pen in first position in the first round.²⁰ As “the people will always prefer the original to the copy,”²¹ trying to imitate the FN’s rhetoric has eventually reinforced the arguments of the only ‘credible’ anti-system party.

The Betrayal of Anti-liberal Promises

The two mainstream blocs of the French political landscape face the same issue: how to internally reconcile seemingly opposing views on cultural and economic liberalism? The mainstream right, which, despite the social characteristics of the Gaullist tradition, has officially embraced economic and financial liberalism since the 1980s,²² needs to appeal to a more anti-

liberal electorate on cultural issues. The mainstream left has, on the other hand, promoted a clearly liberal agenda on cultural affairs since the 1970s, while trying to appear to resist the liberalization of the economy. In fact, the two faces of liberalism have progressed in parallel, thus it may be impossible to reconcile these two opposing objectives. The economic interests of the “culturally liberal” electorate of the mainstream left indeed tend to support a liberal economic order, while the economically liberal forces of the mainstream right tend to push society toward mobility, cultural diversity, and individualism, all of which fosters cultural liberalism. In practice the experienced governance of the mainstream parties in the last decades seems to confirm that anti-liberal positions cede to liberal ones, which result in undelivered illiberal promises. The right-wing bloc has not, when in power, re-examined or amended the decisions and laws made by the left-wing governments on cultural issues, despite the promises to do so. From the legalization of abortion and the abolition of death penalty in the 20th century, to rights for same-sex couples in the 21st century, the mainstream right leaders have not in fact sought to change the laws they fought against the most during their time in the opposition. Similarly, though left-wing opposition has been very critical of the liberalization of the French economy, the successive left-wing governments have not in fact reversed the economic liberalizations made by the right-wing governments. Indeed, since 1983, the various Socialist governments have embraced a liberal economic program. Liberal measures, being cultural or economic, have therefore acutely revealed the discrepancy between the campaign rhetoric and the practice of power, which has been used by the FN as the main indicator of the failure of the political alternance. This discrepancy, which corresponds to our second condition for the rise of populism, has been particularly striking under the last two presidencies.

Over the last decade, both Nicolas Sarkozy’s and François Hollande’s victories in the presidential elections were explained by their ability to appeal to the whole spectrum of their respective political blocs, including their anti-liberal factions. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy strongly criticized the permissiveness of “ideology of 1968”²³ and vowed to “honor the idea of the nation and national identity.”²⁴ Five years later, François Hollande famously claimed to be an enemy of the liberalization of the financial world.²⁵ These postures have helped unite anti-liberal voters behind their candidacies, but also explained the rejection of the people when both presidents were said to have betrayed these promises.

17 Aurélien Mondon, *The Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia*, Routledge, 2016, p. 172.

18 http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/03/05/donald-trump-nouveau-modele-de-nicolas-sarkozy_4877078_823448.html.

19 <http://www.arnaudmontebourg-2017.fr/index.php/le-candidat/propositions/>.

20 <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Politique/Sondage-presidentielle-Le-Pen-devance-Fillon-1160720>

21 This expression, often used by Jean-Marie Le Pen, has become the main argument of the FN to attack the “pale imitations” of mainstream politicians embracing a populist or anti-liberal discourse. http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/nicolas-bay-sarkozy-cette-copie-du-fn-qui-ne-vaut-pas-l-original-12-08-2016-2060741_20.php.

22 François Denord, “La conversion au néo-libéralisme. Droite et libéralisme économique dans les années 1980,” *Mouvements*, 35, 2004.

23 Where more than 11 million people protested and thousands of factory workers went on strike, in a catch-all desire to upend traditional values and order.

24 Nicolas Sarkozy, Inaugural Speech, May 6th 2007.

25 François Hollande, Bourget Speech, January 22nd 2012.

Nicolas Sarkozy became president five years after Jean-Marie Le Pen managed to get to the second round of the presidential elections. The shock of the 2002 results framed the 2007 campaign and Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, aimed at winning over the FN voters. His campaign, which focused notably on security and immigration issues, as well as a general anti-establishment discourse, was a success, and Jean-Marie Le Pen received 10.44 percent of the votes, down from 16.86 percent five years before. Nicolas Sarkozy managed thus to reach out to the center²⁶ and the far-right (as well as the center-right), appearing “strong on immigration and crime, an original alternative to the establishment though having been part of governments for a long time, and a defender against evil capitalists, while a friend of the wealthy.”²⁷ Such an overstretched position was difficult to sustain. Once in power, he quickly lost the support of the FN voters, going from 88 percent support in May 2007 to 21 percent one year later.²⁸

Although the so-called “debate on national identity” between October 2009 and February 2010, and the speech of Grenoble in July 2010, where Nicolas Sarkozy took strong positions on immigration, led to a short-term increase in his popularity among the far-right electorate, soon the trust was lost as no concrete change was perceived.²⁹ In 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy followed a strategy designed by his advisor Patrick Buisson, known for his ideological proximity to the far-right movements. His discourse employed, especially between the first and the second rounds of the elections, strongly anti-establishment and anti-media terminology, distinguishing between the “true people” and “silent majority” and the elites and insisting on the Christian roots of France and its people. But rhetoric did not suffice this time, as only 54% of the electors of Marine Le Pen voted for Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round.³⁰ Between 2007 and

2012, Nicolas Sarkozy lost 2 million votes, and many disappointed anti-liberal conservative voters decided to cast a blank vote.³¹

François Hollande was not the favorite for the socialist candidacy at the 2012 presidential elections. He had never been minister, and was mainly known for his search for compromise and synthesis as the first secretary of the French Socialist Party from 1997 to 2008. Although in the running since 2009, he only became a credible candidate following the arrest of Dominique Strauss Kahn in May 2011 in New York.³² He initially relied on a strong rejection of Nicolas Sarkozy in the population and worked to unite all the factions of the left and center-left around him. His presidential campaign found a new momentum in January 2012, during the Bourget speech, in which François Hollande declared: “my adversary is the world of finance”. He also attacked the banking system, the credit ranking agencies, and the hedge funds that were “still the vectors of the destabilization that affects us” and warned the

audience that “what is at stake is the sovereignty of the Republic against the markets and the globalization.”³³ These strong words symbolized the change that François Hollande promised to his electors, and especially to the most anti-liberal left. It later became the symbol of his betrayal of the French people, as his government implemented a liberal program on socio-economic issues. The reforms of the economy and labor laws, caused an open dispute within the PS party between the proponents of a realistic — liberal — economic program, and those who supported the economic vision of the Bourget speech. Finally, the use of the article 49.3 of the constitution, to force the voting of these bills at the parliament without a prior debate, lost the government part of the left-wing electorate. As a result of “his embrace of discredited right-wing economic doctrines,”³⁴ only 14 percent of the electors of the Front de Gauche (far-left party) were satisfied of Hollande’s presidency in October 2016,³⁵ in contrast to 71 percent four years before.³⁶

“ ***The alienation of the anti-liberal voters and the apparent weakness of the president could only benefit the discourse of the Front National.*** ”

26 In 2007, approximately 40 percent of François Bayrou's voters voted for Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round. <http://www.ipsos.fr/sub-sites/presidentielle-2007/pdf/ssu-2eTour.pdf>.

27 Aurélien Mondon, “Nicolas Sarkozy’s legitimization of the Front National: background and perspectives,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2013, 47(1), p. 34.

28 IFOP - http://www.ifop.com/media/pressdocument/344-1-document_file.pdf.

29 The so-called *Loi Hortefeux*, voted in November 2007, was the symbol of the inability of the government to turn the rhetoric into legislative action. The most controversial aspects of the law, such as the DNA tests of immigrants, were all revoked by the Constitutional Court, and eventually not implemented.

30 http://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/05/08/un-parfum-de-vote-de-classe_817340.

31 http://www.marianne.net/Electeurs-FN-le-vote-blanc-a-prive-Sarkozy-de-la-victoire_a217367.html.

32 http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/francois-hollande-la-longue-marche-primaire-ps_1041235.html.

33 François Hollande, Bourget Speech, January 22nd 2012.

34 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/17/opinion/francois-hollande-la-longue-marche-primaire-ps_1041235.html.

35 http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/3530-1-study_file.pdf.

36 http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/1987-1-study_file.pdf.

The discrepancy between the anti-liberal posture of the presidential campaign and the implementation of liberal policies has, moreover, fostered an impression of inconsistency and lack of leadership at the head of the state. The alienation of the anti-liberal voters and the apparent weakness of the president could only benefit the discourse of the FN.

Le Pen and Media

Another factor in the rise of the Front National is the larger media presence that it has enjoyed since the presidential election of 2012. As a matter of fact, the very issue of the time allotted to FN representatives on the TV and radio has become a political issue that has been used to highlight the supposed unfair treatment that the party received in proportion with its share of national votes.

The doldrums in which the UMP found itself after losing the 2012 presidential elections and the subsequent departure of Nicolas Sarkozy from national politics left the party without a leader to take charge of the opposition. In effect, Marine Le Pen and the FN quickly took over this role. The FN was buoyed by the grassroots mobilization against same-sex marriage, which divided the right and created tensions within UMP, and also by the botched election to replace Nicolas Sarkozy as the putative head of the party. The contested results caused a split in the UMP group and left the party without a national leader for a year and a half.

In this context, it is interesting to see whether the FN saw a significantly larger amount of air time during the electoral campaigns that took place since 2012. The difficulty of truly measuring air time has been compounded by criticism, levied solely by the FN, about the tools that are used to measure it. AS Air time is only measured during electoral periods (municipal and European in 2014, departmental and regional in 2015), it is impossible to estimate whether the FN has been 'treated fairly' outside of these times. Articles reporting that Marine Le Pen and her vice president, Florian Philippot, had been the most present on morning talk shows in a 12 month period from fall 2013 to 2014³⁷ and that a specific news channel has disproportionately favored the FN over a period of time³⁸ have been widely

circulated. However, figures issued by French audiovisual authorities show that the FN on the contrary seems to have been underrepresented.³⁹ The underrepresentation can be chalked up to the fact that the FN can count on only two "media-palatable" faces, Marine Le Pen and Philippot, which provides a disadvantage in media-heavy periods such as campaigns. Marion-Maréchal Le Pen, the niece of Marine Le Pen, could provide another face for the party, but tensions between the two women have largely sidelined Marion-Maréchal.

Citing the government's numbers, Marine Le Pen has expressed her frustration toward the fact that "only 5 percent of air time (in political shows) was devoted"⁴⁰ to her party, a figure not reflecting the share of national votes. This purposefully vague figure, shown⁴¹ to be taken from an extreme-left blog, misconstrues the fact that political air time is measured only during electoral periods, and is not based on figures of previous elections, but rather an intricate formula involving representation in the National Assembly (one MP out of 577) and electoral results. Thus, while all estimates are necessarily flawed, if one also included non-election season, the estimate of 18 percent⁴² of air time before the last elections in 2015 seems most credible. The improbably low figure of 5 percent that Marine Le Pen uses fits well with her strategy of victimization and her desire to pit her party against the powerful "elite." In addition to the unfair airtime charges, the FN leadership accuses the justice system for supposedly purposefully singling out the FN for wrongdoing,⁴³ and the conservatives and socialists of electoral collusion to keep the FN out of power.

39 Especially in the 2014 European elections, which were won by the National Front. See the synthesis:

Dubois, Jessica. "Européennes : les temps de parole ne sont pas respectés, selon le CSA." *L'Opinion.fr*, 21 May 2014, www.lopinion.fr/edition/politique/europeennes-temps-parole-ne-sont-pas-respectes-selon-csa-12547. Accessed 6 November 2016.

40 @MLP_officiel. "'Le @FN_officiel n'a que 5 percent du temps d'antenne politique. Il est faux de dire que le tapis rouge nous soit déroulé.'" #InvitéPol." Twitter, 18 April 2016, 11:19 p.m., twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/722308551423692800?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw. Accessed 6 November 2016.

41 Sénécat, Adrien. "Le FN a-t-il vraiment 5 percent du temps d'antenne politique?" *Le Monde.fr*, 20 April 2016, www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/04/20/le-fn-a-t-il-vraiment-5-du-temps-d-antenne-politique_4905150_4355770.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

42 Pauline Moullot, "Temps d'antenne: Marine Le Pen ne prend que les chiffres qui l'arrangent", *Libération*, April 20th, 2016 http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/04/20/temps-d-antenne-marine-le-pen-ne-prend-que-les-chiffres-qui-l-arrangent_1447274.

43 Most recently, in 2010, when Marine Le Pen was found guilty of hate speech or in 2015 when her microparty was investigated for campaign financing irregularities. In January 2017, when a formal investigation was opened to determine whether the National Front irregularly employed parliamentary assistants, Marine Le Pen complained of a "vast series of persecutions" and that "this is a massive political raid organized by the powers that be, who are orchestrating the justice system in order to harm my campaign". See <http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/assistants-parlementaires-du-fn-nous-faisons-l-objet-de-persecution-estime-marine-le-pen-05-01-2017-6528696.php>.

37 Darmanin, Jules. "Marine le Pen et Florian Philippot, plus gros squatteurs de matinales depuis un an." *Le Lab Europe 1.fr*, 16 October 2014, lelab.europe1.fr/Marine-le-Pen-et-Florian-Philippot-plus-gros-squatteurs-de-matinales-depuis-un-an-17656. Accessed 6 November 2016.

38 Martini, Pierre. "Temps de parole : BFM, la part belle au FN." *Regards.fr*, 18 March 2014, www.regards.fr/web/article/temps-de-parole-bfm-la-part-belle. Accessed 6 November 2016.

For the 2017 presidential elections a reform of airtime regulations will be less egalitarian and instead officially favor larger parties,⁴⁴ including the FN. Given the lack of reliable data and the varied importance of elections and of different media, it remains difficult to assess how much relative media representation the FN has received. It is clear that FN has been given media access — and that the media debate will continue to be politically instrumentalized by Le Pen. In addition, it is interesting to notice that, much like other populist parties and movements in Europe and the United States, social media and “alternative news” websites⁴⁵ have served as the most efficient way to disseminate information. Their popularity in France is so important that, in a recent ranking of political news websites (excluding news websites), seven of the top ten most visited websites between July and October 2016 are extreme-right websites, and the website of the FN (ranked 12th overall) is by a very wide margin the most visited website of a political party or movement.⁴⁶ While this data only represents a very specific picture in time, and even the top website is only the 273rd most visited French website overall, it remains nonetheless an active platform of online contest has developed, and that Marine Le Pen’s constant proclamations of disdain for the mainstream media certainly contribute to lock her audience into the so-called *fachosphère*.⁴⁷

From “Hyperpresident” to “Normal President”

The French President is alternatively dubbed as the “republican monarch”⁴⁸ or the “crownless king,” in a reflection of the semi-presidential system in which the president resides. The manner in which the role of the president has been filled has been a particular French factor in the rise of the populist Front National. Flanked by a prime minister who is the head of the government and the only responsible in front of Parliament, anointed by the presidential election which remains the most important election in the country and by the

right to dissolve the National Assembly, the exercise of the presidency is a very personal affair. In this framework, Sarkozy and Hollande have had two fundamentally opposed perspectives on how to “be” president, which has led not only to their weakness at the end of their term, but has also influenced their ability to impose decisions and, most importantly, has caused a certain diminishing of the presidency and provided space for FN.

Nicolas Sarkozy, elected in 2007, quickly expressed his desire to change the exercise of the presidency. In June 2007, when telling the nightly news that “I have been elected to do something on everything,” he proceeded to attempt to reform the constitutional powers of the president in order to place himself in the center of most decisions. “Journalists and parliamentarians are left astounded by the omnipresence of the president. He is at the same time president, prime minister, head of the majority group in parliament, spokesperson for the government” writes the French daily *Le Figaro* on June 2007.⁴⁹ Sarkozy’s dominance went so far that the neologism “hyperpresident” was invented for him. Prime Minister François Fillon was relegated to the position of a mere “collaborator,”⁵⁰ as the government is constitutionally in charge of “determining and implementing the policies of the nation”⁵¹ which are set forth by the president and the prime minister “steers the action of the government.”⁵² In effect, by downgrading the power of the prime minister and largely taking his role, Sarkozy inadvertently moved the system toward a more traditional legislative one. This was symbolized by the fact that Sarkozy regularly gathered at the Elysée a group of seven key ministers — oftentimes without PM Fillon — in 2008 and 2009. This presidency, which troubled the more usual balances of power that had persisted since the death of General de Gaulle, gave the image of a president that was of course active and in charge, but also made him responsible for the eventual failures, which is problematic in a system where only the prime minister can be held accountable for the policies of his government. Unlike the prime minister, the president cannot be removed from office and holds the power to dissolve the National Assembly, which would also cause the government to step down. The National

44 See *Le Monde.fr*. “Présidentielle : les députés adoptent la réforme du temps de parole.” *Le Monde.fr*, 5 April 2016, www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2016/04/05/egalite-du-temps-de-parole-les-deputes-se-prononcent-sur-les-regles-de-la-campagne-presidentielle_4896220_4854003.html. Accessed 6 November 2016 for a projection of air time for the 2012 presidential elections with the planned 2017 system.

45 In French, sites de réinformation, as in the act of “informing again.”

46 See <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/antoine-bevort/blog/211016/les-trente-sites-politiques-francais-ayant-le-plus-d-audience-sur-le-web-0> for further detail.

47 A contraction of the word *facho*, slang for “fascist,” and sphere, designing the constellation of extreme-right and conspiratory websites.

48 In the French understanding of the term, as it relates to “la République.”

49 Jaigu, Charles and Bruno Jeudy. “Nicolas Sarkozy, l’hyperprésident.” *Le Figaro.fr*, 21 June 2007, www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2007/06/21/01002-20070621ARTFIG90222-nicolas_sarkozy_s_engage_personnellement_sur_tous_les_fronts_et_invite_sa_majorite_a_l_audace.php. Accessed 6 November 2016.

50 Roy, Marc Le. “La Ve République est-elle devenue un régime pleinement parlementaire?” *Le Monde.fr*, 9 December 2010, www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/12/09/la-ve-republique-est-elle-devenue-un-regime-pleinement-parlementaire_1450802_3232.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

51 Article 20. *Constitution du 4 octobre 1958*. www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006527483&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006071194. Accessed 6 November 2016.

52 Article 21. *Constitution du 4 octobre 1958*. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006527485&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006071194>. Accessed 6 November 2016.

Assembly can also decide to vote down the government in a confidence vote, but has no means to depose the president. For all of these reasons, Sarkozy's exercise of the presidency was controversial, called "imperial,"⁵³ by some and some saw in it an (unfortunate) emulation of the American system, earning him the moniker "Sarko l'Américain."⁵⁴ Over time, Sarkozy was not able to count on the support of members of the government on whose territory he had encroached, and was unable to use the government as true representatives of his will, especially since his — unelected and unaccountable — counselors had largely taken over the media role that would be devoted to ministers. Similarly, because he had such a dominant position in his party, public discontent that might otherwise have been dispersed among the party was concentrated on the president. This left the political opposition and the often vocal French streets as the only counterweight.

Therefore, the concentration of powers, action and initiative in the hand of Sarkozy backfired when his policies were not bringing clear success in early 2010 and led to a overcorrection toward the prime minister, whose popularity rates were significantly higher than the president's,⁵⁵ which again reinforced the idea of a consolidated parliamentary system. Furthermore, Sarkozy, in order to gain more right-wing votes departed from traditional "republican" notions of integration and in effect managed to pit populations against one another, creating especially a wave of tensions against French Muslims. By making the position open to daily criticism about the conduct of policies, by associating his position at least to some extent against certain minorities, Nicolas Sarkozy redefined the exercise of the presidency under the Fifth Republic, thus establishing expectations for the next president. In his most recent book Nicolas Sarkozy looks back and explains that "my

“ **Advocating or embodying the “normal” as opposed to “hyper” president will also participate in the deconsideration of the presidency.** ”

failure is due first and foremost to my overcommitment. I have to confess a reluctance to delegate. My conception of leadership drove me every day to be leading the battles.”⁵⁶ This is the very conception that will drive Hollande's idea of how the presidency should be exercised — taking him in the opposite direction.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, François Hollande's conceptualized the idea of a “normal president,” in opposition to Sarkozy's extensive conception of the presidency — and his penchant for publicly showing off his wealth and propensity to spend his free time with celebrities.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, Hollande recognized that “it has been bestowed upon me to shape a new conception of the presidency,” given that before him only

Jacques Chirac and Sarkozy had been elected to a five-year term (instead of seven, changed by referendum in 2000). Hollande theorized that “the risk behind the presidential word is dispersion: one day you talk about environment, the next about employment, and then about school. You must prevent this word from looking directionless. Each time you speak, you need to be able to reinject perspective and depth”⁵⁸ into the debates. The concrete application of this thought was to paint himself as someone who would restore dignity and modesty, if not even decency, to the presidency. Aside from the communication-oriented side that expressed itself by Hollande wishing to continue to live in the apartment he shared with his partner, or traveling to Brussels by train instead of plane, Hollande defined himself in opposition to Sarkozy as opposed to setting a new model, and ended up being held accountable in a manner that mirrored his predecessor.

In retrospect, advocating or embodying the “normal” as opposed to “hyper” president will also participate in the deconsideration of the presidency. Very quickly in his tenure, campaign promises were not being met and a vocal opposition built up against Hollande around on the issue of same-sex marriage. Gérard Davet and Fabrice Lhomme note that a year after his election, Hollande decided he should discard the idea of a “normal president.” Hollande, in this controversial tell-all book, admits the rhetoric made

53 Allières, Paul. “La présidence impériale.” *Libération.fr*, 26 septembre 2007, www.liberation.fr/tribune/2007/09/26/la-presidence-imperiale_102551. Accessed 6 November 2016. or Montvalon, Dominique de. “« Il faut repenser la doctrine et le programme du PS ».” *Le Parisien.fr*, 22 July 2007, www.leparisien.fr/politique/il-faut-repenser-la-doctrine-et-le-programme-du-ps-22-07-2007-2008230364.php. Accessed 6 November 2016.

54 A nickname bestowed upon him — negatively — after the WikiLeaks cables showed the admiration he aroused from U.S. diplomats. See notably WikiLeaks. “ALLAN HUBBARD'S CALL ON INTERIOR MINISTER SARKOZY.” Public Library of US Diplomacy/WikiLeaks.org, 4 August 2005, www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS5335_a.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

55 Some commentators even mentioning, tongue in cheek, the idea of a “hyper prime minister.”

56 Sarkozy, Nicolas. *La France pour la vie*. Plon, 2016, p. 80.

57 The New York Times will even pick up the nickname of ‘President Bling-Bling’. See: *The New York Times*. “‘President Bling-Bling’.” *The New York Times.com*, 22 March 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/03/22/opinion/22sat4.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

58 Wieder, Thomas. “Hollande: Un style, cela s'imprime au fur et à mesure.” *Le Monde.fr*, 8 September 2012, www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/09/08/hollande-un-style-cela-s-imprime-au-fur-et-a-mesure_1757432_823448.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

him appear as if he were not governing — not making decisions, contrary to Sarkozy — and that it was not compatible with having a more active prime minister who would carry out the role constitutionally assigned to him. “It was suffocating him,” says Hollande, while the authors cynically note “two ‘normal’ guys leading the country is one too many,”⁵⁹ in a thinly veiled reference to Jean-Marc Ayrault’s relative lack of charisma. Hollande’s attempts to assume a stronger presidential role will be, starting in the summer of 2013, largely limited to foreign and especially security policy,⁶⁰ as attested by the launch of the operation in Mali and the Central African Republic, and to acting as a father figure for a scarred nation after the terrorist attacks in 2015. On domestic issues, the government will never recover the control over the communication and the coherence of its policies, especially as governmental unity quickly went haywire and will give the image of a largely leaderless nation.

Overall, as Davet and Lhomme sum up, “a triple deficit of preparedness, authority, and embodiment [of the presidency] have led to an unprecedented weakening of the function of the presidency”⁶¹ which will impact the French system going forward, starting with the next president. In reality, the weakness of the French semi-presidential system may well be that it does not accommodate too weak or overly strong characters. Sarkozy thought he would have to compensate the shorter length of his term by increased activity, which turned against him and exposed him — and by extension, his role — to open criticism. Hollande will later express regrets, saying that “perhaps I should not have been so present in leading the country, in the choices to make, and that I should have put myself above the fray in order to protect myself”⁶² — and by extension, the presidency. This quote clearly expresses the difficulty of finding the right balance in exercising the presidency. Hollande considered himself an overbearing president that did not leave enough room to his prime minister, when as a matter of fact he came to power armed with a clear understanding of how this very behavior had (partly) led to Sarkozy’s demise. Eventually, the fact that both presidents, despite a diametrically opposed perception of their action by popular opinion, will both concede

that they were too active or hands-on is the expression of peculiarity of a French system that knows no normalcy, and reflects a form of historical exceptionalism.

Increasing Tensions Around the Exercise of the Presidency

The rise of the Front National during the last decade is intrinsically linked to the crisis of mainstream political parties in France. The vision and rhetoric of the FN has gained in credibility and legitimacy as leaders from both LR and PS used anti-liberal discourses while in opposition, and failed to deliver when in power. The betrayal of these promises, in addition to the apparent helplessness of the different French governments to create a new economic momentum after the 2008 crisis, have weakened the traditional political balance in France. The *alternance* between the mainstream right and the mainstream left has become the symbol of a system unable to regenerate itself and to present new political offers. Both Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, in their own ways, have failed to prevent — and to a certain extent even participated in — the emergence of a political landscape in which the FN appears as the only real alternative to the so-called “system,” which is failing. The FN will continue to face structural and institutional obstacles that may limit the electoral success of its leaders, but its anti-establishment and anti-liberal discourse will certainly become more influential as mainstream parties are unable to reinvent a credible counter-discourse. This being said, and contrary to what many international commentators may think, the 2017 presidential elections do not necessarily constitute the best context for Marine Le Pen. The French electoral system, structured around two rounds and helping the reunion of all the liberal electorates against the candidate of the FN in the second round, presents a daunting hurdle. This cannot be compared to the Brexit referendum or even the U.S. elections. Moreover, François Hollande has decided not to run for and Benoît Hamon, looks to be the likely Socialist candidate. As a result, the leader of the FN will not face the government’s incumbent, and therefore will not benefit from the position of outsider. If she passes the first round, Marine Le Pen is likely to face a true conservative such as François Fillon, or a brand-new face in the political landscape such as Emmanuel Macron. The result will remain uncertain until the end, but the success of the FN in the upcoming presidential election is not as inevitable as some may say.

The issue of the mandate of the next president and to what extent he represents the French electorate will define the next five years of French politics, more than in the previous

59 Sarkozy, Nicolas. *La France...*, p. 81.

60 For more info, see: Scheffer, Alexandra de Hoop, Martin Michelot and Martin Quencez. “After the Terror Attacks of 2015: A French Activist Foreign Policy Here to Stay?” German Marshall Fund of the United States.org, 2016, www.gmfus.org/file/7998/download. Accessed 6 November 2016.

61 Sarkozy, Nicolas. *La France...*, p. 82.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

presidencies of Sarkozy and Hollande. Paradoxically, it is the very system that had been changed in order to favor the role of the president that may further hamper the presidency. On June 11 and 18 2017, France will hold legislative elections, which are designed to give the newly elected president a majority in the National Assembly (the high chamber) in order to facilitate his or her action. Every electoral cycle since 2002 gave the president a comfortable majority. While 2017 should be no different, the predicted outcomes will create some obstacles in the exercise of the presidency.

Because the voting system of the legislative election is different than the presidential, the FN bases most its hopes on this race in order to bolster their national power.⁶³ Under the current system, any candidate that obtains 12.5 percent of registered voters in the first round can stand in the runoff, meaning that three (or more) candidates can face one another for one of the 577 seats. Based on projections⁶⁴ from the intermediary elections and local opinion polls, a polling institute has determined that there could be up to 151 districts where a PS, LR, and FN candidates face one another compared to 33 such cases in 2012. Similarly, there could be only about 120 districts where a traditional PS/LR duel would take place instead of 420 five years ago. While these projections may rest on a pure mathematical approach that does not account for the demonstrated “legitimist” trend of the French electorate, which is prone to give the president a majority, they do however highlight the progress that the FN will make and its expectation of winning a bare minimum of 25 seats, with some analysts claiming that they could reach up to 100 seats.⁶⁵ Any figure would be unprecedented under the current voting system,⁶⁶ where the FN has never had more than two seats and would most likely reignite the calls for a return to a proportional system in which the FN would claim a larger number of votes and a fairer share given the amount of votes it is bound to receive in the presidential elections. Therefore, we can expect that a few fundamental tensions, with potential long-term implications for political stability in France, can be identified in the electoral process.

63 Faye, Olivier. “Législatives 2017 : le Front national cible 101 circonscriptions.” *Le Monde.fr*, 2 April 2016, www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/04/02/legislatives-2017-le-front-national-cible-101-circonscriptions_4894443_823448.html. Accessed 6 November 2016.

64 OpinionWay and La Lettre de l'opinion. *Législatives 2017 : vers une recomposition inédite?* Opinion Way.com, June 2016, www.opinion-way.com/pdf/la_lettre_de_l_opinion_-_legislatives_2017_-_vers_une_recomposition_inedite_-_juin_2016.pdf. Accessed 6 November 2016.

65 Alidières, Bernard. “Entre 40 et 100 députés pour le FN en 2017?” *Libération.fr*, 3 May 2016, www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/05/03/entre-40-et-100-deputes-pour-le-fn-en-2017_1450303. Accessed 6 November 2016.

66 The 1986 elections, held under a proportional system, gave the FN 35 MPs in the National Assembly.

Firstly, the high projected amount of three-way elections will either favor more seats for the FN if partisan voting discipline remains strong, or will force a controversial agreement between the PS and LR in order to block the FN. In the latter case, a repetition of the 2015 regional elections where the PS withdrew its candidate in order to let the LR candidate win was used by the FN as an illustration of its “UMPS” idea, that the two parties are interchangeable and that only the FN offers a true alternative. This scenario would also be an important test to assess the extent to which the president controls his majority. The inability of Hollande to control the different wings of the party from the beginning being a condition of his demise, it is imaginable that such a test would weigh strongly in the ability of an LR president to operate.

Secondly, while it is expected that an LR president would have a majority, even a small majority, and that the main opposition party may well be the FN, with a PS that could largely disappear and would be left leaderless depending on the scale of its defeat in the presidential election. The combination of an emboldened FN and a weak PS could steer discussions away from how to reform France and rather about political representation and unconstructive criticism. Therefore, a weak president and stronger parliament could retrigger discussions towards a Sixth Republic, which has been an agenda topic for some current influential candidates, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Arnaud Montebourg, among others.

The analysis of the mandate of Hollande has shown that a weak president at home also means a weak president in Europe. At a moment when Europe is at a crossroads and when the French people want to reclaim French leadership on and of the EU, the danger of a weak president who seemingly cannot restore French influence runs the risk of unwillingly giving more credence to the simplistic solutions that the FN offers. In between reaping the fruits of its *dédiabolisation* strategy and a discourse that will shift toward the importance of representativeness, it is likely that the function of the presidency in France will continue to be weakened. As long as the system does not change and party preferences remain stable, there is little chance for the FN to ever elect a president; in this context, the stability of the system will hinge on whether the LR can unite around a strong line for the next five years, and whether the PS can successfully rebuild itself around a clear political line in order to restore a more usual electoral balance, and also to offer credible political alternatives that would rebuild a more uncontested role for the president.

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