

François Hollande's victory is a very "normal" one for France's left

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The Monday morning edition of the French left magazine *Libération* featured a triumphant François Hollande alongside the headline "Normal!" to the bewilderment of many journalists outside France. [Catherine Fieschi](#) argues that "Normal!" perfectly captures the feeling of the left in France that Hollande's victory does not mark a revolution in French politics, and reflects their feelings that he is more than capable of a competent and quietly confident presidency.



One of the most striking things about Monday morning's coverage of François Hollande's victory on the BBC was the journalists' collective bemusement at the *Libération* headline: "Normal!" Yes, of course there was much weighing of how Hollande's victory would play immediately in the markets (especially with the Greek election results as backdrop), there were discussions about the tough choices ahead, and what the parliamentary elections hold in store. But commentator after commentator returned to the Libé headline with much head-scratching, 'not sure what this is about really', they chuckled. Why did a triumphant left, and its newspaper, choose such an anticlimactic cover? Yet the headline contained just about everything one needed to know about the fears, expectations and perceptions that define this moment for the left in France.

Of course the "Normal!" refers most directly what Hollande himself avowedly sought: to be a 'normal' president. Not flamboyant, without the penchant for sensationalism or for the dubious one-liners, without the model wife, without the bling. The anti-Sarkozy. But other more interesting references are contained in that one exclamation.

This is not 1981

As many French commentators (both left and right) were at pains to point out on Sunday night, the traditional Bastille 'rassemblement' of the left on election night seemed slightly more subdued than in 1981. It still looked like a pretty good party to me—but as the old left guard pointed out, where was the delirious joy that marked François Mitterrand's election in 1981? There was a distinct sense in which this younger left was not doing them proud. Indeed participants in the festivities themselves started to wonder out loud whether they were 'delivering', as it were. Even Benoît Hamon, spokesperson for the Socialist party, interviewed by France 24 freely admitted on air that he had been too young in 1981 to be a part of the celebrations, but then suggested that perhaps, in fact, things seemed more subdued this time around. And back in the TV studios, the question was endlessly debated: was this less of a celebration than back then? And if so why?



The suggestions were diverse, and of course a number of people pointed out that 1981 was particularly significant because the left had never held the presidency under the Fifth Republic. For the Left, 1981 meant that the Gaullist republic had been tamed and captured. It said something about the Left's successful

adaptation, but also something about the Fifth Republic's resilience. It marked the (re)turn to a balanced system of alternating government. Interestingly, while the Left rejoiced in its extraordinary victory, it was the Fifth Republic that could have generated a 'Normal!' headline.

Overall, however, what emerged most clearly from this desperate attempt to capture the true nature and level of the celebrations on Sunday night was a crucial point about the end of delusions and illusions. One commentator put it most eloquently: he referred to the 'end of delusional lyricism' or the 'awakening from dreams of utopia' (la fin de l'illusion lyrique). For the left this marked a growing up, a refusal to dress this up as a system-changing moment; precisely the kind of view that had prevailed in 1981. This was, in other words, business as usual. For the left it is about proving that it already knows how to handle the presidency and perhaps more professionally (no major U-turns in the coming years) through an established system, via an established set of institutions. The policies will shift, but the system is neither at stake nor in peril. Le changement oui, la révolution, non. Normal!

It is also about sending a message of continuity and confidence in preparation for the parliamentary elections: François Hollande has one month to establish the Left as France's current, natural party of government in the eyes of hesitant voters. And one month to quell the fears, already being stoked by the UMP and the right, about an over-concentration of power in the hands of the Socialist party.

The headline quietly celebrated a victory not about power, but about competence. And above all about quiet confidence. The return, in veiled terms of Mitterrand's 'force tranquille'. A break with bling then, but not a break with tradition. Normal!

QED

The point that was perhaps least picked up about the headline, and yet would have been obvious to most younger French voters, was the – for Libé, quite normal, as it were – slangy colloquialism. Normal! Is as much a 'well, duh', a shrugged QED as it is an expression about normality. A cross between, 'whatever' and a proud, sly 'Well, what did you think would happen'?

Against Sarkozy's quite dignified but emotional speech (that focussed mostly on himself) and Marine Le Pen's bullying, angry, performance on Sunday night, Monday morning's headline offered something that had been in short supply for a long time—the relief and predictability of the normal.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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