

In 2012 France has seen gains for the Front National, success for François Hollande and electoral defeat and infighting for the UMP.

by Blog Admin

Rainbow Murray reviews an important year in French politics, one which has seen the left return to power for the first time in a decade, as well as gains for the far-right. 2012 has also been a difficult year for the centre-right in France, with the defeat of President Nicolas Sarkozy in the presidential election, followed by infighting over who will succeed him in the leadership of the UMP.



2012 was a pivotal year in French politics. It saw the Left return to power after a long period in the wilderness, while the Right had a difficult year, and the far-right demonstrated resurgent strength. The key moment was the presidential election in late April and early May. There were ten candidates, including front-runners Nicolas Sarkozy (outgoing president, representing the centre-right UMP), and François Hollande (representing the centre-left Parti Socialiste (PS)). Other notable candidates included Marine le Pen, who had inherited the far-right Front National (FN) party from her father, Jean-Marie le Pen, in 2011; Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of the far-left Front de Gauche; and François Bayrou, of the centrist Democratic Movement (MoDem), who had come third in 2007.

In early 2012, Hollande enjoyed a significant lead over Sarkozy in the polls. Sarkozy chipped away at this lead throughout the campaign, but ultimately was not able to reverse the trend. A notable event unfolded in March, when a lone gunman shot dead seven people, including three soldiers and three young children. The shooter was identified as a French-Algerian Islamist terrorist, Mohammed Merah, thus reinforcing the ethnic tensions already rife in France.

In the first round of voting, Hollande and Sarkozy qualified comfortably for the second round, avoiding a repeat of 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen beat the Socialist candidate into third place. Nonetheless, Marine le Pen produced a record score of 18% for her party, achieved in part through a narrowing of the gender gap in the traditionally male-dominated *frontiste* electorate. Mélenchon scored 11%, while Bayrou came fifth and lost his influence as kingmaker in the second round.

The campaign featured a lurch rightwards by Sarkozy in an attempt to regain ground lost to the FN on issues such as immigration. This was

particularly noticeable in the second round, when Sarkozy was dependent on the sizeable FN electorate to try and close the gap with Hollande. Mélenchon supported Hollande, while Bayrou declared that he would not vote for Sarkozy due to Sarkozy's flirtations with the far-right. The final debate allowed Sarkozy to emphasise his experience compared to Hollande, who had never held ministerial or local executive office. However, Hollande countered with a memorable speech using anaphora to describe how France would change if he were president. Ultimately, the French did vote in favour of change,



although Sarkozy reduced the gap to three percentage points, much smaller than it had been at the start of the year.

The legislative elections which followed in June were an anti-climax, overshadowed by the presidential elections and characterised by voter fatigue. Sarkozy's immediate withdrawal from politics after his presidential defeat had left the UMP with a leadership vacuum. Struggling to maintain an image of unity, the UMP claimed that the Left should not monopolise all branches of power (the presidency, the Senate – where they had obtained a majority for the first time in 2011 – and local politics, where the Left had become increasingly dominant during its years in opposition). These claims were unpersuasive given that all previous monopolies of power had been on the Right. The French prefer for the president to have a parliamentary majority, and Hollande managed to obtain an absolute majority for the PS without having to depend on other left-wing parties. This was despite the embarrassment caused by 'Tweetgate', whereby Valerie Trierweiler (Hollande's partner) tweeted her support for Olivier Falormi, a dissident Socialist candidate running against the official party nominee. The scandal humiliated Hollande because Falormi's opponent was Ségolène Royal, the PS presidential candidate in 2007 and Hollande's ex; he had secretly left Royal and their four children for Trierweiler during Royal's election campaign. The incident was therefore both political and personal, and undermined Hollande's attempts at being an "ordinary" ("normal") president who eschewed the personal dramas that had epitomised Sarkozy's years in office.

Since the elections, Hollande has not got off to a flying start. The French economy continues to stall, and Hollande is seen as hesitant and lacking the dynamism and decisive action of his predecessor. His poll ratings have plummeted since his election. His government, composed for the first time of 50% women, mostly lacks prior governing experience – as do Hollande himself and his prime minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault. This is partly a reflection of the Left's long period out of power (they had not been in government since 2002 and François Mitterrand was their only president prior to Hollande). Internal quarrels continue to plague the Left, with some government policy being voted down by communist Senators.

One saving grace for the PS, however, has been their seamless appointment of a new party leader. Although Hollande, as president, is the party's natural figurehead party, the internal organisation passed from Martine Aubry to [Harlem Désir](#) (and thus, from its first female leader to its first non-white leader). The PS avoided a repeat of the 2008 drama, when the leadership contest between Aubry and Royal was bitterly contested and resulted in a very narrow victory for Aubry that was mired by accusations of foul play on both sides. In 2012, the transition was well prepared and without controversy.

The same cannot be said for the UMP. The succession to Sarkozy was bitterly contested by Jean-François Copé, the previous leader, and François Fillon, who had served as prime minister throughout Sarkozy's presidency. The outcome of the election was a [complete shambles](#). Both men publicly claimed victory before the result was officially declared. Each accused the other of cheating, with question marks particularly raised over Copé's manipulation of his position as acting leader to influence the organisation and outcome of the election. It took more than 24 hours for the count to be completed and Copé declared the winner. However, a few days later it emerged that one overseas territory had erroneously been excluded from the count; including these results shifted the outcome in favour of Fillon. A new count took place, with numerous ballots discarded, resulting in the increase of Copé's declared lead from a few dozen votes to nearly 1000. Fillon refused to accept this result as valid, and formed a separate parliamentary party in protest. With most of the party's MPs behind him, and with state finance of parties tied largely to their seats in parliament, Fillon's gesture was ultimately effective in forcing a concession from Copé. After a month of deadlock, in which many senior figures sought unsuccessfully to negotiate a truce, Copé and Fillon finally agreed to rerun the election in September 2013. Copé will act as leader until then, and Fillon's supporters will return to the UMP parliamentary fold. However, Copé will not be able to exert the same influence over the organisation of the next elections, with greater emphasis on transparency and openness to ensure that the new result will be accepted as valid by all. It remains to be seen whether this compromise will salvage the party from the brink of collapse.

Ultimately, 2012 has been a very eventful year for French politics, yet few actors have emerged

triumphant. Hollande obtained a more narrow victory than anticipated and his popularity has since plummeted. Sarkozy was defeated, with his party nearly self-destructing in the aftermath. Mélenchon failed to beat his arch-nemesis, Le Pen, in either the presidential or parliamentary elections. In contrast, the FN had a good year. Their record score in the presidential elections was followed with two parliamentary seats, their first since 1997. Their popularity may well decline once the economy improves and the mainstream parties get their act together again, but for now, the relative success of the FN is symptomatic of French politics' troubled waters.

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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