

Why do the French hate their politicians so much?

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*The French distrust their politicians and democratic institutions – more so than other Western Europeans. Why? Emiliano Grossman and Nicolas Sauger, authors of **Pourquoi détestons-nous nos politiques?**, argue that the French presidential system raises unreasonable hopes and expectations that quickly lead to disillusionment among voters.*



A woman wears a Génération Changement raincoat featuring François Hollande before the 2012 presidential elections. Photo: [Blandine Le Cain](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

Times are tough for established politicians. In most countries, trust and confidence are declining, while abstention increases. Incumbency has turned into a disadvantage in many countries. Age has become a liability, rather than an indicator of experience and people who make a career solely out of politics are regarded with suspicion. At the same time, populist leaders represent an increasing danger for parties of government and have already made successful bids for power in some countries.

In a nutshell, anti-politics is becoming a common feature of contemporary politics. France is no exception. The current presidential race features many of the symptoms above. The Front National is likely to lead in the first round of the presidential elections. A complete newcomer, Emmanuel Macron, without support from any of the major parties, may come second and the two major government parties, the Parti Socialiste and the conservative Les Républicains, may not even make it through to the second round. The two main parties have virtually always alternated stints in power since the Socialists first came to power in 1981. Trust has fallen, and so has turnout in parliamentary elections.

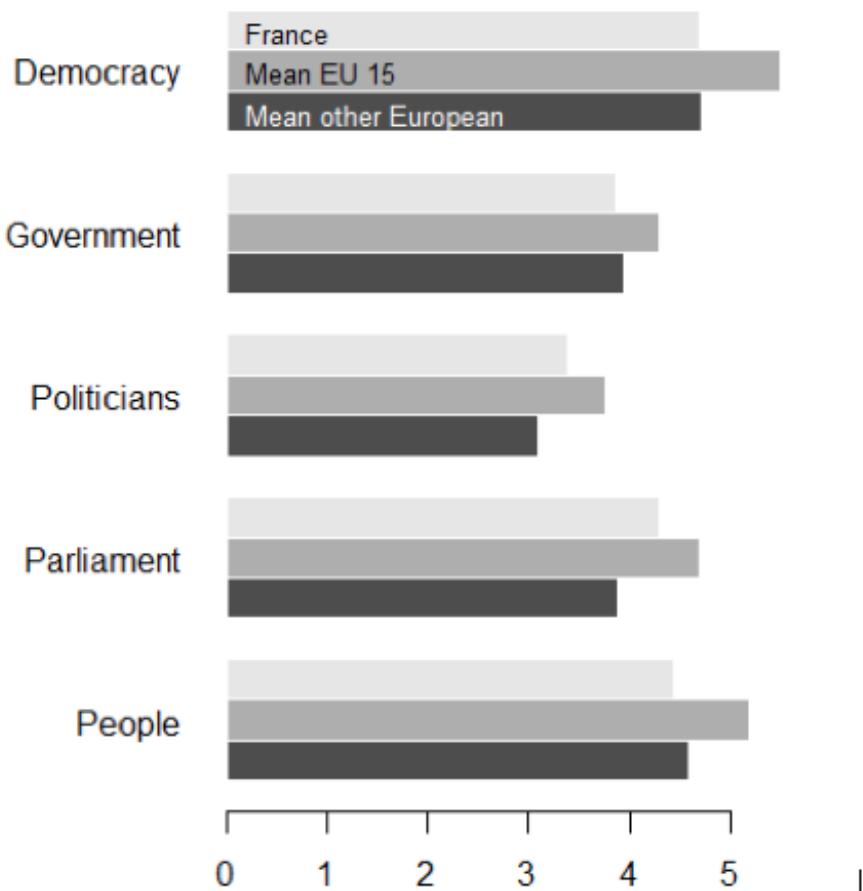
While this does not mean that overall trust in democracy is dwindling – [as has been argued for other countries](#) – there are certainly grounds to worry, as disillusionment with politics is becoming a near-permanent feature of French politics. While this phenomenon is of course not limited to France, we believe that France's specific variety of anti-politics finds its roots not just in French politics or the characteristics of French politicians. We believe that there are structural sources of discontent.

Why so much distrust?

France is not the worst country when it comes to trusting governmental elites or institutions. Nor is it the best. Indeed, it is regularly lies among the most negative scorers for most factors. As shown on the graph below, France has systematically lower levels of trust in major democratic institutions than the mean among its Western European neighbours. In this it resembles Eastern or Southern European countries more closely than its neighbours.

There are several possible explanations for this situation, which we review in greater detail in our recently published book, [Pourquoi détestons-nous autant nos politiques ?](#).

Trust and confidence in... (ESS, 2012)



One explanation could be that French policies are simply less efficient, and that outputs and outcomes do not meet expectations. A cursory look at widely visible policies, such as health or education, does not confirm this. France consistently figures among the better performers on those issues, even if it is not among the top performers – especially in education.

Another possibility could be that French elites are particularly disconnected from voters' realities. This feeling is certainly shared by a significant number of people. And yet, looking at France's neighbors, things do not look very different. Sociologically speaking, French elites are as (un) representative as those of its neighbors. Women and the working class are underrepresented, while elected representatives are older, better-educated and richer than the societal average.

A popular explanation – in France and abroad – insists on the importance of France's resistance to globalisation and, more generally, the French propensity to protest, strike etc. British and US media outlets often associate those characteristics with [France's decline](#) and lack of competitiveness. And yet France no longer tops the table of comparative statistics for strikes or demonstrations, while it is the seventh largest receiver worldwide of foreign

direct investment (FDI).

Institutions, expectations, and disappointment

In [our book](#), we argue that anti-political sentiment in France is mainly due to the political disappointment created by French political institutions. The reasons are quite straightforward. The centrality of the presidential election raises expectations with regard to candidates. These candidates have to make bold promises to stand a chance of beating their rivals. The victorious candidate begins his mandate with strong legitimacy and popularity.

But only a few months later, he –only once has a woman qualified for the second round – experiences a sharp decline in popularity, as the bold promises are met by the constraints of real life. As an EU member with a high level of trade openness and capital mobility, France is exposed and constrained by what its main trade partners and other economic actors do. Unilateral decisions and radical reforms end up being very costly and are, eventually, abandoned. And voters end up greatly disappointed.

France has been repeating this vicious circle since the late 1980s. The major consequence is that no incumbent government has won a re-election bid since 1978. Moreover, since the presidential mandate was shortened to five years (since 2002), no president has won a second mandate. François Hollande even refrained from standing for re-election this year.

The current political campaign bears witness to the potentially far-reaching consequences of the current state of affairs. Whoever wins the second round on 6 May, the vicious circle of high expectations and great disappointment is not likely to come to an end. The greater the disappointment, the more erratic electoral behaviour will be and the more trust in institutions and elites will decline. So far, there is clearly no political will to address those issues through institutional reforms. Some candidates have pushed for a 6th Republic, but the most likely outcome is institutional status quo after the election.

Another possibility is deadlock: if either Macron or Le Pen were to win the election, they are both unlikely to secure a parliamentary majority in the subsequent legislative elections. If that were to happen, institutional reform is likely to become one of the most pressing issues in the months to follow.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

[Pourquoi détestons-nous autant nos politiques ?](#) is published by Presses de SciencesPo.

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