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‘The elephant in the room’ no more: Europe as a structuring line of political cleavage in the 2017 presidential election

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Abstract:
It is traditionally argued that the topic of European integration is rather absent or under-discussed in the French political debate. In this context, it came as a surprise that the 2017 French presidential election turned into a ‘référendum sur l’appartenance à l’Union’ (Costa, 2017). This article argues that after many presidential campaigns where Europe remained ‘the elephant in the room’, 2017 saw its settling as a clear line of cleavage between political parties, relegating the traditional left/right cleavage to a secondary position. The politicisation of socio-economic questions at European level also signalled a move away from the traditional value-based Eurosceptic grounds towards a will to shape the debate towards a more social Europe.

Keywords: legislative election, France, Europe, cleavage, Euroscepticism

Introduction

It is traditionally argued that the topic of the European Union (EU) and European integration is rather absent or under-discussed in French presidential campaigns (Dehousse and Tacea, 2015; Costa, 2017). Yet, institutionally, Europe remains within the remit of the President. The lack of politicisation of the Europe issue in the French political debate needs to be analysed in parallel with developments in the European construction. Authors specialised in European politics have argued that the 1992 ratification of the Maastricht treaty marked a turning point with a move from a ‘permissive consensus’ to a ‘constraining dissensus’ and a clear politicisation of the European issue (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). However, authors like Green-Pedersen (2012) emphasise the difference between politicisation of Europe in referenda and in national elections with the latter struggling to take off.

In this context, it came as a surprise that the 2017 French presidential election turned into a ‘référendum sur l’appartenance à l’Union’[1] (Costa, 2017). For a number of years and despite a tight ratification of the Maastricht treaty in 1992 as well as the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, France had witnessed a consensus between the dominant centre-right and centre-left political forces on the fundamental advancement of the EU project (Drake, 2013, pp. 127-128). Even though increasingly apparent lines of fractures were emerging in the socialist party and the UMP, officially both parties campaigned in favour of a ‘yes’ to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Its rejection by 55% of the people and the quick fix offered by Sarkozy as he took office in 2007 led to the Lisbon treaty ‘with some of the same provisions […] of the rejected constitution’ (Kassim, 2008, p. 276). This

[1] ‘referendum on the EU membership’

push ahead by the political establishment ignoring the clear signs sent by the electorate about a European construction which they felt was detrimental to their economic situation and their status is evident until 2017.

However the 2017 presidential campaign marked a change. As Reynolds argues (2017, p. 128), 'recognising the mounting scepticism towards Europe alongside the seemingly immovable French commitment to the project, no presidential candidates saw any real value in prioritising it in their campaigns'. Yet, centrifugal forces, namely populism from the left and from the right as well as a new centrist pro-European political movement, squeezed traditional political parties out and revealed two radically opposed views on the role of France in the EU and the socio-economic impact of the EU on France. Having been monopolised by the Fillon scandal on the accusations of fictitious employment of his wife, the debate turned to the issue of Europe only in the latter part of the campaign, with six out of the 11 candidates in favour of some form of Frexit (Mélenchon – *La France Insoumise*, Le Pen – *Le Front National*, Dupont-Aignan – *Debout la France*, Asselineau – *Union populaire républicaine*, Cheminade – *Solidarité et Progrès*, Poutou – *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) and four who were critical of the orientation of the European project (Hamon – *Parti Socialiste*, Arthaud – *Lutte Ouvrière*, Fillon – *Les Républicains*, Lassalle – *Résistons!*). The politics of fear centred on France's loss of sovereignty, be it economic, monetary or identity-based, as well as a rejection of capitalism and the market economy, became very prevalent. On the other side stood Macron, the leader of a new political movement, *En Marche!*, who forcefully proclaimed himself pro-European.

Taking the analytical lens of European rejectionism developed by Startin and Krouwel (2013) which identifies three motivations for rejecting the EU – values such as sovereignty, protest grounded in domestic discontent and ideology driven by an anti-liberal sentiment – this article argues that each of the candidates spoke to the three categories of rejectionists, politicising the issue of Europe mainly through socio-economic issues even when sovereignty was associated with regaining economic control. For the first time, Europe was not the underlying issue, 'the elephant in the room', but became was frontally discussed and debated regarding its impact on France and France's role in it, an inwards/outwards double look which each candidate engaged with. Ultimately after decades of lukewarm political discourse over the issue of Europe, it was the three radical candidates on the topic that monopolised the debate: the pro-European Macron and the two Euro-rejectionists, Mélenchon and Le Pen.

This article firstly looks at past presidential campaigns from 1995 to 2012 in order to analyse the ways in which 'Europe remained 'the elephant in the room'' (Reynolds, 2017, p. 128) for the voters due to the inextricability between France and the European Union. It highlights how it is only in 2012 that it can be argued that the presidential campaign became 'Europeanised' (Dehousse and Tacea, 2015). Section two moves onto the 2017 presidential campaign discussing the ways in which this Europeanisation increased and structured the lines of cleavage clearly setting politicisation of the European issue on the basis of France in or out of the EU, capable of radically reforming the European treaties or not. Finally, section three concludes by looking at what the 2017 campaign tells us about the

future of France in Europe at a time of rising Eurosceptic sentiment across the European Union and as the Brexit negotiations are starting.

1995 – 2012: from political party consensus to dissensus, the emergence of Europe in the presidential debate

It has been demonstrated that the issue of Europe did not feature prominently in the 1995, 2002 and 2007 presidential campaigns but that 2012 represented a 'game changer' (Reynolds, 2017). This is confirmed when looking at the ranking of the priorities listed by the electorate at each presidential campaign from 1995 to 2007. CEVIPOF surveys in 1995, 2002 and 2007 asked the electorate to rank 13 issues and Europe arrived respectively last, third last and second last. Looking in detail at the issue of Europe in the French political debate in a historical context, the 1995 presidential campaign took place a few years after the Maastricht referendum which sanctioned the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the abandonment of national currencies for the Euro. As pointed out by Kassim (2008, p. 267), Chirac became president in 1995 at a time when France seemed to have lost influence within the European Union while ''Europe' had become a contentious domestic issue.' The ratification of the Maastricht treaty took place through referendum in 1992 and led to an explosion of a dissatisfied French public opinion onto the European scene. 'The Maastricht episode divided French public opinion over Europe' (Sauger, 2008, p. 66) and left long-lasting effects regarding Euroscepticism in France. Whereas the referendum route looked like a guaranteed success given the polls, political parties such as the Communist Party and the Front National but also key political personalities such as the gaullists Séguin and Pasqua as well as the socialist Chevènement, campaigned against the monetary and economic loss of sovereignty detailed in the treaty. As a consequence, following the rejection by the Danish people a few months earlier, the French people returned a very small 'yes' of 51.04%. Despite this polarisation on a central European issue, the 1995 campaign was marked by the 'conspicuous absence of a serious discussion on Europe' (Mazey, 1995, p. 146). The mainstream parties having campaigned in favour of ratification, they had no appetite to revisit this issue and open Pandora's box.

A similar pattern emerged in the 2002 presidential campaign with the coming into force of the Euro earlier that year. There was no discussion about a re-orientation of the European project despite the significant protest vote on the extreme Left and the extreme Right, with the Front National reaching the second round of the election for the first time. Between 1990 and 2002, the proportion of polled people who said they would be very relieved if the EU was dissolved went from 6.4% to 15.3%, a clear sign of rising Euroscepticism (Flood, 2005, p. 44). As a result, the mainstream political parties once again stayed clear of the topic during the campaign in order to preserve their political capital (Belot and Cautrès, 2004). Furthermore, Chirac, who had been criticised for his handling of the French presidency of the Council concluding with the adoption of the Nice Treaty in 2000, had not managed to relaunch the traditional Franco-German engine of the European Union with Chancellor Schroeder (Kassim, 2008). Despite this indifference if not distrust of the French opinion towards Europe, Chirac 'began during the course of his quinquennat to express his vision of the EU as a

'federation of nation states'.' (Kassim, 2008, p. 270) His second mandate was dominated by the negotiation of the Constitutional Treaty, presided by a former French President Giscard d'Estaing. Despite a vigorous pro-treaty campaign, the result came back 55% against this new European project.

Given the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French, despite 'the core of the Eurosceptics represent[ing] around 25 per cent of the French population' (Sauger, 2008, p. 66) and the fears this treaty had generated regarding the impact of European integration on France's economic and social model, Europe would have been expected to be a salient issue in the 2007 presidential campaign. Yet again, total isolation between domestic politics and European issues happened. Sauger (2008, pp. 71-72) gives three reasons to explain this watertight boundary between national and European issues. Firstly, he points out that Europe was not a structuring cleavage the same way the left/right divide traditionally is. Secondly, there was an overwhelming consensus over the issue of Europe among governing parties while Eurosceptic parties were kept outside of the Parliament which ratifies European treaties. This led to a ''neutralization' of Europe as a source of party division' (p. 71). Finally, people in France demonstrated benign indifference for European issues which were not considered as significant. This consideration of Europe as a secondary issue was comforted by the political elites who considered that there was absolutely no political gain in discussing Europe and therefore focused on domestic issues, despite those being very often affected in one way or another by decisions made at the European level.

2012 is however seen as a 'Europeanised contest' (Dehousse and Tacea, 2012) at the domestic level and the European level since the key candidates, Sarkozy, Hollande, Le Pen and Mélenchon, defined 'some key features of the policy they intended to pursue at European level if they were elected [… while] other member states closely followed the campaign [… and] indicated a preference for one of the candidates' (p. 4). Drake (2013) highlights how salient the candidates' speeches and manifestos had rendered the issue of Europe given the impact of the economic crisis. Hutter and Kerscher (2014) demonstrate that the crisis generated an increasing politicisation of the issue among French voters. Therefore Sarkozy announced his candidacy by setting France in Europe and the world: 'France cannot act as if Europe did not exist […] as if the world did not exist' (cited in Drake, 2013, p. 125). When looking at the IPSOS poll done about ranking the issues of concern for the electorate in the 2012 presidential election, Europe did not even feature among 16 issues listed. Similarly, an Opinionway poll done in March 2012 showed that only 8% of the voters considered 'la construction européenne' as influencing their choice as opposed to employment with 42%.

However, this low ranking of Europe among the concerns of the voters in the 2012 campaign, after four years of Euro crisis management carried out by Sarkozy, should be read through the prism of France's deep embeddedness in the EU as a founding member state (Reynolds, 2017). None of the economic and social consequences could be understood or dealt with at national level. Reynolds (2017, p. 128) explains very clearly that Europe 'is stitched into the very fabric of how [France] works and importantly how France views itself'. Even though the European Union is not at the origin of 80% of French legislation, it has become

'more of a domestic than a foreign policy issue' (Rowdybush and Chamorel, 2011, p. 170). The 2012 campaign was therefore run mainly on the politicisation of Europe on economic grounds rather than identity ones (Hutter and Kerscher, 2014). During his campaign, Hollande focused on arguing for a re-orientation of the Economic and Monetary Union with the renegotiation of the Fiscal Compact Treaty in order to include a Growth and Employment Pact which would counter-balance the inevitable austerity measures needed to comply with the new treaty. Overall, the tone of the 2012 campaign was very critical of Europe. In a similar if less aggressive way than the extreme left, Mélenchon, and extreme right, Le Pen, the socialist candidate developed an anti-austerity rhetoric, which marked the end of the consensus over the advancement of European integration. As argued by Reynolds, 'Europe [has] progressively become increasingly important as an electoral issue, rendering its days as the 'elephant in the room' very much a thing of the past' (2017, p. 130).

The issue of Europe having become so politicised with increased salience and polarisation across the range of French political parties, 2017 tested whether 'Europe [had achieved] the status of a cleavage that can disrupt and override existing patterns of party support' (Sauger, 2008, p. 71) based on a primary left/right cleavage.

2017: the European Union as the structuring issue of the political cleavages

Out of the 11 candidates, 10 of whom were either for some form of Frexit or extremely critical of the direction of European integration, this article will focus on the top four, attracting more than 10% of the votes, namely Macron, Le Pen, Mélenchon and Fillon, as well as Hamon as the representative for one of the traditional key political forces in the French party system, namely the Socialist Party. This section looks firstly at the appetite of voters for non traditional parties or what has been labelled 'anti-system' candidates in an attempt to solve issues which the traditional 'alternance' between the conservatives and the socialists never fixed. Secondly, taking the lens of EU rejectionism as developed by Startin and Krouwel (2013), it analyses how candidates articulated their position on the place of France within the EU and the impact of the EU in socio-economic terms for France.

From traditional politics to 'anti-system' politics: the relegation of the left/right divide in favour of a pro/anti Europe cleavage

The issue of Europe featured in eighth position of concern for the French voters, at the same level as their pension and the healthcare system (IPSOS, 2017). This represents a significant improvement on similar polls done for previous presidential election. Nonetheless, it does not reflect the significance that the issue ended up having in terms of structuring the debates and the cleavages between the candidates. There are two reasons for this situation. The first one is that ultimately, the two selected for the second round of the election were Macron and Le Pen, the former labelling himself the candidate 'of the right and the left' while the latter calling herself the candidate 'of neither the right nor the left'. Both candidates clearly rejected this left/right divide to structure their campaign and

looked for another line of cleavage which ended up revolving around the EU and being the 'progressistes' versus the 'patriotes'. The second reason, as Costa (2017) points out, comes from the fact that all the candidates, except for Macron, had called for a no vote to the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005. The rising Euroscepticism, which was visible during the 2017 presidential campaign, is not restricted to France as the Dutch parliamentary campaign of March 2017 and the breakthrough of Geert Wilders highlighted. It also came after the earthquake of the Brexit which saw populists like Farage and the UKIP win a referendum to extract the UK from the EU. Poland and Hungary have both seen clear anti-EU integration governments come to power over the last five years. This rising wave of Euroscepticism is the consequence of the increasing success of populist parties in Europe, on the extreme-right of the political spectrum mostly, which have been getting closer to power.

Two elements seem particularly striking in the 2017 presidential election. Firstly, the left/right cleavage was relegated to secondary position and trumped by the open/closed or pro/anti globalisation with Europe as the main structuring cleavage. The vote for candidates regarded outside 'the system' or the traditional political parties fostered this de-alignment from a left/right line of fracture. However this was also enhanced by 15 years of rising Euroscepticism and lack of engagement with European issues by politicians since the razor-tight ratification of the Maastricht treaty. The occurrence of the economic crisis and the deep involvement of France in its management changed the centrality and visibility of Europe in the political debate while deepening the divisions on its benefits (Rozenberg, 2015). Secondly, the 2017 campaign was overwhelmingly run on socio-economic issues relating to the European Union. Particularly in between the two rounds, the debate focused on the Franco-German engine of European integration which Macron wants to relaunch and the regaining of economic and monetary sovereignty which Le Pen considers vital. Her alliance with Dupont-Aignan before the second round crystallised even more attention on her economic vision for France the option of a double currency, Franc and Euro. Given the minimal results by the previous presidency over the reduction of unemployment figures, it might not be surprising that the issues of purchasing power, employment and social inequalities monopolised the debate to the detriment of values or identity-based arguments.

France in or out of Europe: institutional arrangements between the domestic and the European level

Following the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty by France in 2005, Startin and Krouwel (2013) identified three types of EU rejectionism. The first two types were visible in the no vote to the Maastricht treaty: one is a traditional sovereignist and value-based vote which rejects the principle of shared sovereignty in the EU and is mostly found on the right of the political spectrum. The second one exists in the radical left or right and is not ideologically based but represents a protest vote grounded in domestic discontent. The authors consider that the rejection of the 2005 Constitutional Treaty has triggered the emergence of a third category of EU rejectionists who are ideologically driven, contesting a neo-liberal EU which promotes further globalisation. Interestingly those three

faces of EU rejectionism are apparent in the 2017 campaign, even though Le Pen is probably the one candidate who took aspects of each category of EU rejectionism to build her manifesto.

Each of the major candidates spoke to at least one of the three categories of Euro-rejectionist voters. Fillon addressed the concerns of the pro-sovereignists in the direct tradition of Gaullism and Seguinism, at the core of the no campaign against the Maastricht treaty. His manifesto called for 'une Europe souveraine qui respecte pleinement les Nations.'[2] (Fillon, 2017) His view of Europe fits the intergovernmental approach (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter, 2015) looking to reform the European Commission 'en concentrant l'exercice des compétences européennes sur quelques domaines fondamentaux et en appliquant strictement le principe de subsidiarité[3].' (Fillon, 2017) The argument focuses on preserving French national interests and making sure that only some strategic areas remain within the remit of the European Union.

Targeting the third category of rejectionist voters, Mélenchon and Hamon, in two different styles and with two radically opposed solutions, criticised the European Union for its neo-liberal stance which they argued destroys workers' protection rights and the French social model. Hamon, the socialist candidate opposed globalisation with a strong, social and protective Europe. Believing in the founding principles of the European Union, he argued that 'la solution ne peut venir ni du retour à des Etats-nations divisés, ni de la poursuite de l'austérité économique et de son pendant, le déficit démocratique'[4] (Hamon, 2017). His argument was clearly in favour of more Europe, wanting a Europe of energy and a Europe of defence as well as a reform of the Eurozone economic governance. Taking the criticism of neoliberalism a step further, Mélenchon's manifesto argued in favour of exiting the European treaties through negotiation with the European partners of entirely new rules or a unilateral withdrawal from the European Union which equates to a hard Frexit. His argument was that 'notre programme n'est pas compatible avec les règles des traités européens qui imposent l'austérité budgétaire, le libre-échange et la destruction des services publics'[5] (Mélenchon, 2017). With his radical left-wing manifesto, Mélenchon grounded his rejection of the European Union and the Eurozone in a protection of the Nation's interests against wild globalisation.

Interestingly, this ideological grounding also works in understanding Le Pen's approach to the issue of France in Europe. Traditionally the Front National voters would have belonged to the second category, protesting against the system, the establishment and the government of the day (Startin and Krouwel, 2013, p. 75). However the more recent political line followed by Le Pen as advised by her right hand man Philippot has brought the party electoral success in traditionally

[2] 'a sovereign Europe which fully respects Nations.'
[3] 'in focusing European competence on a few crucial areas and in applying strictly the principle of subsidiarity'.
[4] 'The solution can neither be a return to divided Nation-States nor pursuing economic austerity and its consequence, democratic deficit.'
[5] 'Our manifesto is not compatible with the rules of the European treaties which impose budgetary austerity, free trade and the destruction of public services.'

socialist or communist territories such as the North. It has also involved drawing from the first category of rejectionism regarding sovereignty issues and the third category of rejectionism when it comes to blaming globalisation and neo-liberalism for the economic difficulties faced by their working class voters. Le Pen plays all those cards anchoring her manifesto in the idea of 'rendre à la France sa souveraineté nationale. Vers une Europe des nations indépendantes, au service des peuples.'[6] (Le Pen, 2017) involving a referendum on exiting the EU and the Eurozone. Sovereignty is very much at the heart of her project with a reclaiming of the four lost sovereignties 'monétaire, législative, territoriale, économique'[7] (Le Pen, 2017). Weaved into this sovereignty argument is the one on economic patriotism which rejects free-trade agreements such as the CETA and globalisation.

Finally, Macron, 'Monsieur Europe' (Le Point, 2017), 'à la pointe du combat pour la poursuite du projet européen'[8] (Quéré, 2017), anchored France's future and its economic success in Europe. Amazingly, given the constant rise of Euroscepticism in France, he campaigned on a strong pro-European platform, arguing for further integration in the reform of the EMU governance and the relaunch of the Franco-German engine of European construction. His rallies were notorious for having as many supporters waving European flags as there were waving French flags, something unheard of in any presidential campaign. He spoke to the non-rejectionist voters who believed the future of France was in the European Union. The specific context of this positioning helped in aggregating some political gain on this particular issue even though it had not been the case since 1992. Indeed Brexit and the premises of chaotic negotiations focused the minds over what exiting the EU really mean and gave Macron and his vision of a protective and social Europe some significant traction.

Apart from Fillon, the issue that they all engaged with when discussing the impact of the European Union on France is how Europe can economically and socially protect workers and citizens or not. Even though Costa (2017, p.4) argues that the populist and Eurosceptic candidates '[ont] présenté la sortie de l'Union comme un événement disruptif susceptible de redonner la parole au 'peuple' contre le 'système''[9], they moved away from the issue of immigration and identity-based arguments against the EU. Socio-economic questions and EMU governance were at the centre of the 2017 campaign.

The Europeanisation of socio-economic issues: emerging from domestic discontent but looking for a European solution

Given the significance of the economic crisis and the failed promise of President Hollande to significantly reduce mass unemployment in France, it came as no surprise that economic issues and the role of Europe as part of the solution or the

[6] 'Give France its national sovereignty back. Towards a Europe of independent nations, at the service of people.'
[7] 'monetary, legislative, territorial, economic'
[8] 'at the forefront of the fight for pursuing the European project.'
[9] 'have presented an exit from the European Union as a disruptive event which could give a voice back to the 'people' against the 'system''.

problem emerged at the centre of the presidential campaign. Two economic questions emerging from domestic discontent but looking for a solution at European level came to the fore: fiscal and social dumping and Economic Monetary Union governance.

Fiscal and social dumping matters federate the feeling that the EU is the problem and not the solution, particularly for those who are the 'left behind' of globalisation or what Guilluy (2014) calls 'La France périphérique'. A whole fringe of people who voted for Le Pen, east of a line running from Le Havre to Marseille, find themselves in struggling rural or peri-urban areas with high levels of unemployment and disappearing public services. The European issue which crystallised the most the idea that Europe is part of the problem and cannot be the solution at a social level is the Bolkestein directive regarding detached workers. It aims at creating a single market of services and allows to use workers from another EU country, usually a Central or Eastern European member state, and pay them the wage of that country while complying with the social legislation of that country as well. This directive has been the source of many instances of social dumping which has been primarily felt in France by working class and middle class voters. As a result, Le Pen and Mélenchon both argued that the directive should not be implemented in France anymore. Le Pen argued that it was creating 'une concurrence déloyale inadmissible'[10] while Mélenchon considered that 'la législation nationale doit s'appliquer totalement, y compris concernant les cotisations sociales patronales et salariales.'[11] (Le Monde, 2017) Even Fillon and Hamon who came from two different economic perspective agreed that the directive had to be radically overhauled. Fillon went as far as considering that its implementation on French soil should be suspended if its amendment did not see the light of day before the end of 2017. On this particular issue, the strong pro-European Macron also took the approach that the rules for sending detached workers should be revised at European level and in particular they could only be sent for a maximum of 12 months. This overwhelming consensus of all candidates on the identification of a problem affecting many French workers and stemming from European regulation, highlights the level of politicisation of the issue of Europe in the 2017 presidential campaign.

In the same vein, the campaign involved many discussions on the future of the EMU and its governance. This issue of concern came from the fallout of the economic crisis as it was interpreted in France and was not grounded in other countries' debate. The populist Eurosceptics, Le Pen and Mélenchon, blamed the Euro for France's unemployment through delocalisation, anaemic economic growth and public deficit and called for radical solutions. Le Pen originally wanted France to drop the Euro and return to the Franc, her right-hand man Philippot having famously said that 70% of the manifesto could not be implemented if the Euro was kept (Albertini, 2017). However, in seeking an alliance with *Debout la France*, the first alliance the Front National ever managed to strike, she was forced by its leader Dupont-Aignan to drop the exiting of the Euro and reconsider a dual currency system with the Franc for internal exchanges and the Euro for external

[10] 'Inadmissible unfair competition'
[11] 'National legislation must apply fully, including with regards social contributions by employers and employees.'

ones. This ended up costing her in focusing the attention on a key aspect of her manifesto which she struggled to defend in particular during the televised debate with Macron in between the two rounds. Mélenchon evolved during the campaign about abandoning the Euro. Some of his suggestions of renegotiation of the European treaties involve ending the independence of the European Central Bank which is simply unimaginable at the European level due to the German opposition. Facing the populists, Macron, Hamon and Fillon all considered that the governance of the Eurozone should be reformed. Fillon focused on the creation of an ad hoc political executive composed of Heads of State and Government meeting every three months and a 'Secrétariat Général de la zone Euro – complètement indépendant de la Commission européenne'[12] (Fillon, 2017). Macron and Hamon leaned more towards the lack of democratic representation when it came to the Eurozone and called for the setting up of a specific Parliament dealing with the Eurozone. Macron further campaigned for a budget and a Finance Minister for the Eurozone, which once elected Merkel publicly declared was a possibility (Le Parisien, 2017).

In a climate of violent Germanophobia fuelled by Le Pen on one side and Mélenchon on the other, both arguing that France was being subservient to Germany and Merkel was *de facto* in charge of the country, it is particularly noteworthy to point out that Macron from the start of his campaign insisted that further European integration would be key to the development of France and that at the heart of this laid the Franco-German duo. With those key socio-economic issues at the heart of the campaign in a context of post economic crisis and slow recovery, the candidates attempted to shape the debate at the European level. The issue of an economic government had been on the cards since the creation of the Stability and Growth Pact in 1997 but had systematically been rejected by the Germans in particular. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Hollande 'made a firm pledge to 'renegotiate' the Fiscal Compact Treaty negotiated by Sarkozy and Merkel in December 2011' (Drake, 2013, p. 229). He was partly successful with the Compact for Growth and Jobs being agreed at the European Council in June 2012. However tensions with Germany over France's inability to bring its public deficit below 3% of GDP continued after the ratification of the Fiscal Compact. Given the level of Germanophobia expressed during the French presidential campaign as well as Macron's strong signals towards a rekindled strong Franco/German relationship, Germany also indicated its openness to EU level policy and institutional changes as wanted by Macron. The 2017 presidential election with its strong pro/anti Europe line of cleavage was seen as a window of opportunity by the candidates to influence the European agenda.

Conclusion: What is the future of Europe in the French political debate?

Since 1992 and the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, France has seen the level of Euroscepticism slowly rise and infuse every single electoral campaign. However, the issue of Europe remained 'the elephant in the room' during each of

[12] 'Secretariat General of the Eurozone – completely independent from the European Commission.'

those presidential campaigns, often used as the undercover argument for every problem France was facing. The 2017 French presidential campaign however marked a new step in the Europeanisation of French elections for three reasons.

Firstly, the traditional left/right cleavage which forged French political life and explains the existence of the 'quadrille bipolaire' as coined by Duverger was heavily challenged. The line of fracture was between the ones in favour of an open, Europeanised and globalised France versus those wanting a closed, outside of the EU and protectionist France. Even if the left/right cleavage has not disappeared, it certainly did not constitute the main explanation for understanding the positioning of candidates such as Mélenchon and Le Pen as opposed to Macron and Fillon. The 2017 presidential election will remain as the most Europeanised French election because of this level of politicisation rather than 'elephant in the room' approach. Citizens were asked to vote according to where they thought France should position itself in Europe – at the heart of it as a motor of integration with the Germans, at the fringes or outside.

Secondly, the politicisation of the issue of Europe was focused on socio-economic matters rather than value or identity. Macron won the 2017 presidential election on a clear and daring pro-European platform. The French voters did not want any of the traditional parties in power again and took a gamble on a non-party candidate whose movement En Marche! did not exist 15 months prior to the election. Macron constituted the response to populist Euroscepticism and was given a cautious chance by the electorate, demonstrated by relatively lower levels of participation compared with previous presidential elections. He is clearly faced with an obligation of result on economic issues. His success or failure will determine whether French citizens, who have felt left behind by this neo-liberal European construction happening away from their control, can reconsider the impact that Europe has on France.

Finally, all European countries have seen the rise to power or close to power of populist Eurosceptic political parties. Europe breathed a sigh of relief when Macron was elected. However, more than just relief, the French presidential election symbolised the political gain that can be had by pushing a pro-European, reformist and social agenda. This could also emulate in other European countries and forge the way forward towards a more citizens-oriented European integration.

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