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► **To cite this version:**

Anne Muxel. Electoral Mobilisation in 2012. Revue Française de Science Politique (english - édition anglaise), Sciences Po University Press 2013, 63 (2), pp.1 - 17. hal-01878855

**HAL Id: hal-01878855**

**<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01878855>**

Submitted on 21 Sep 2018

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# ELECTORAL MOBILISATION IN 2012

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Anne Muxel

*Translated from French by Katharine Throssell*

An election is always the result of a more or less predictable encounter between citizens and those who govern them. Electoral turnout is a complex equation involving several sociological and institutional factors, both structural and cyclical.<sup>1</sup> But it also depends on other phenomena which, although they are more random and difficult to pin down, are just as decisive. The effects of the image and personality of candidates, via which affect and identification are constructed and break down, have an undeniable role in the process of electoral mobilisation that takes place over the course of a given campaign.<sup>2</sup> The range of parameters that structure personal, relational and psycho-affective environments also play a fundamental role.<sup>3</sup> Above all, however, in a political context in which public opinion appears changeable because voters are puzzled, and critical because they are distrustful, voters sometimes choose to abstain. In the spring of 2012, even as key elections for the future of France were being held, almost half of French citizens (48%) declared that they had no faith in either the left or the right's ability to govern the country.<sup>4</sup> Electors have their say by choosing a candidate or a political party, but they can also express themselves through their silence at the polls, or even their withdrawal from all forms of electoral participation.

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1. See in particular Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

2. Daniel Boy and Jean Chiche have demonstrated the importance of a candidate's image and personal qualities in the process of electoral decision-making. See their recent work: Daniel Boy, Jean Chiche, "Les candidats: des images cristallisées", in Pascal Perrineau (ed.), *La décision électorale en 2012* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), 37-57. More generally, Philippe Braud has emphasised the importance of affect in the way citizens relate to the political field. See Philippe Braud, *L'émotion en politique* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1996).

3. I have elsewhere demonstrated the importance of the affective environment for individual forms of politicisation and ideological orientation in the French context. On this subject, see my book *Toi, moi et la politique. Amour et convictions* (Paris: Seuil, 2008). Céline Braconnier has also stressed the need to consider electors in their contexts in order to capture the workings of electoral participation in her recent book, *Une autre sociologie du vote. Les électeurs dans leurs contextes: bilan critique et perspectives* (Paris: Lextenso Éditions, 2012). Other authors, such as Donald Green, Alan Gerber, Alan Zuckerman and Diana Mutz, have carried out research on the role of personality traits as well as the affective context with regard to attitudes to voting. See their work: Alan S. Gerber, Donald Green, Christopher W. Larimer, "Social pressure and voter turnout: evidence of a large-scale field experiment", *American Political Science Review*, 102(1), 2008, 33-48; Alan S. Gerber, Gregory A. Huber, David Doherty, Conor M. Dowling, Connor Raso, Shang E. Ha, "Personality traits and participation in political processes", *The Journal of Politics*, 73(3), 2011, 692-706; Alan S. Zuckerman (ed.), *The Social Logic of Politics. Personal Networks as Contexts for Political Behavior* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Diana Mutz, "The consequences of cross-cutting networks for political participation", *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(4), 2002, 838-55. See also the recent work by Meredith Rolfe, *Voter Turnout. A Social Theory of Political Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

4. Post-electoral survey following the 2012 presidential election conducted by Cevipof, by telephone, between 10 and 29 May 2012, with a representative sample of 2,504 people from the French population.

French voters are no longer systematic voters, and their participation, increasingly dependent on the nature of the vote and a perception of what is at stake, has become intermittent.<sup>1</sup> The civic norm associated with the duty to vote has unquestionably been weakened as recent generations have succeeded each other.<sup>2</sup> Both the repertoires of meaning attached to the act of voting and the uses of abstention have become more diverse.

Since the end of the 1980s, abstention has become both more widespread and more commonplace, reaching critical levels for certain elections in recent years. Beginning with the legislative elections organised directly after he became President of the Republic, all of the mid-term elections which occurred during Nicolas Sarkozy's five-year term were marked by record levels of abstention. The first round of the 2007 legislative elections saw an abstention rate of 39.6% and the second round 40.4%, just four weeks after the exceptional turnout witnessed for the presidential election. 2008's municipal elections saw abstention at 38.9% in the first round and 37.8% in the second round. It was likewise at 59.4% for 2009's European elections, 53.6% in the first round and 48.7% in the second round of the 2010 regional elections and, finally, 55.6% in both the first and the second rounds of 2011's cantonal elections.

Responding by abstaining has thus earned a place of its own in the French electoral landscape, a place which is likely to become predominant or even majoritarian in certain elections. However, the presidential election is exempt from this civic disaffection. It remains both more attractive and more accessible than many other elections largely because – in addition to being a duel between two candidates – it is organised around a clear and polarised confrontation between two political camps. In addition to this, it mobilises public institutions and the media in a way that no other election does.<sup>3</sup> Although there has been a significant increase in abstention rates in legislative elections since the end of the 1980s (+18.1 points between the first rounds of 1986 and 2012), the presidential election has shown relatively stable levels of electoral turnout over the same period (only +2 points in abstention between the first rounds of 1988 and 2012, see Figure 1). Calculated for all of the Fifth Republic's nine presidential elections based on universal suffrage, the average abstention rate is 19.7%

1. On the spread of intermittent voting, see the studies conducted on a permanent demographic sample by Insee, and in particular the contribution by Stéphane Jugnot and Nicolas Fremeaux, "Les enfants des baby-boomers votent par intermittence, surtout quand ils sont peu diplômés", in *France: Portrait social. Édition 2010* (Paris: Insee, 2010), 121-31.

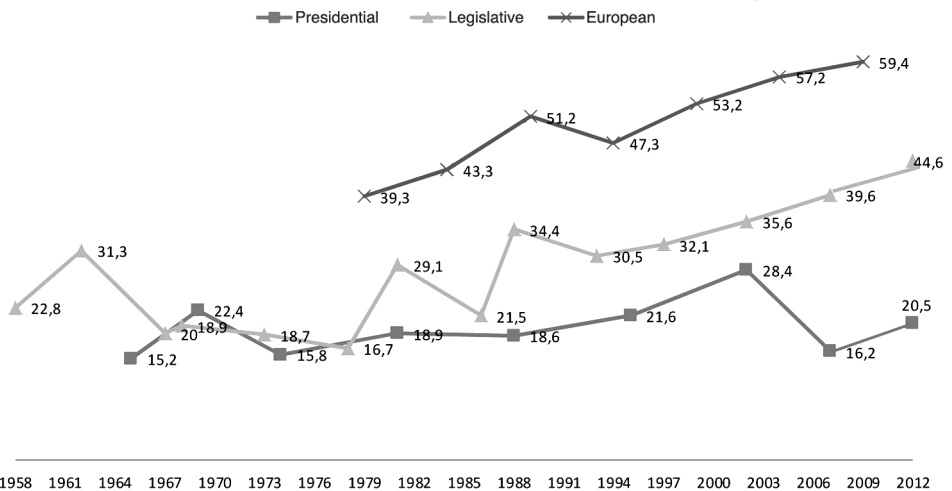
2. On the transformations of electoral behaviour over the course of generational renewal, see Pierre Bréchon, "L'abstention. De puissants effets de génération", in Anne Muxel (ed.) *La politique au fil de l'âge* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2011), 91-113; Vincent Tournier, "Comment le vote vient aux jeunes", *Agora/Débats jeunesse*, 51, 2009, 79-96; or my own work *Avoir 20 ans en politique: Les enfants du désenchantement* (Paris: Seuil, 2010). For an analysis of this generational decline in electoral turnout in the international context, see André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte, Richard Nadeau, "Where does turnout decline come from?", *European Journal of Politics*, 43, 2004, 221-36. Cf. also Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout*.

3. To avoid abstention during the 2012 presidential election, the government launched a campaign to encourage people to vote: 1 million brochures and 100,000 posters were distributed in prefectures and other public places. Advertising space was also purchased on the internet, to the tune of 1.8 million euros. For their part, political parties conducted campaigns aimed at reducing abstention rates caused by the fact that the election was scheduled in the middle of the school holidays. This part of the campaign focused on raising awareness of voting by proxy. The PS set up a website (<http://www.procuration2012.fr>). The UMP did the same: 600,000 emails and 300,000 letters signed by Jean-François Copé were sent to party members and sympathisers. Proxy voting concerns between 1 million and 1.5 million electors over the national territory (during the 2007 presidential elections 1.2 million proxy votes were cast in the first round, and 1.4 million in the second round). In certain neighbourhoods of Paris, notably the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissements, the rate of proxy voting for the 2012 presidential election reached between 12% and 14% of voters (source: [http://opendata.paris.fr/opendata/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?document\\_id=133&portlet\\_id=102](http://opendata.paris.fr/opendata/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?document_id=133&portlet_id=102)).

for France as a whole. This is significantly lower than the rate for legislative elections: 28.3% on average for the fourteen legislative elections organised since 1958. But of all these elections, it is the European elections that have provoked the highest rates of abstention: 50.1% on average for the seven elections that have occurred since 1979.

The presidential election thus remains by far the most likely to result in high voter turnout. Even though it is also affected by the mistrust that the French exhibit towards their political system, it has held strong. It stands apart as a major moment of civic and political mobilisation, and is increasingly becoming the sole focal point for the timing and the agenda of French citizens' electoral participation. Always considered the most important election of the Fifth Republic, the presidential election is also increasingly the one that French citizens prefer. Moreover, it benefits from certain factors that facilitate participation: a personalisation of electoral competition; the decisive issue of the designation of the highest function as the head of state, a psycho-affective aspect in entrusting the country to the competence and project of a man (or a woman) who incarnates the nation's collective destiny; and finally, the simplification of electoral choice in the context of left-right bi-polarisation.

**Figure 1. Changes in abstention rates in the first round of presidential, legislative and European elections in the Fifth Republic (as percentages)**



Source: Official results, Ministry of the Interior.

For the Fifth Republic's ninth presidential election, French citizens turned out at the polls and participated fully in the electoral decision. Turnout level reached 79.5%, equivalent to the level in the first round of the 1995 presidential election. In the second round, turnout was almost identical (80.4%, up 0.9 points). But compared with previous presidential elections which generally recorded an increase in turnout for the second round – leaving to one side the highly unusual 2002 election in which there was a marked increase in turnout during the second round because of the presence of Jean-Marie Le Pen (+8.2 points) – the second round of the 2012 presidential election did not see a significant reduction in abstention.

**Table 1. Abstention rates in rounds of voting in Fifth Republic presidential elections (as percentages)**

	1965	1969	1974	1981	1988	1995	2002	2007	2012
1 <sup>st</sup> round	15.2	22.4	15.8	18.9	18.6	21.6	28.4	16.2	20.5
2 <sup>nd</sup> round	15.7	31.1	12.7	14.1	15.9	20.3	20.2	16	19.6
Difference	+0.5	+8.7	-3.1	-4.8	-2.7	-1.3	-8.2	-0.2	-0.9

Source: Official results, Ministry of the Interior

Thus, nearly eight out of ten French citizens participated in the choice of their future president. In spite of their uncertainty, their perplexity and the endless to-ing and fro-ing of the campaign, citizens turned out to vote in large numbers. Compared to the mid-term elections held during the last presidential term, turnout in the first round was massive. It was also high compared to the 2002 presidential election (+7.9 points) although it remained below the electoral momentum of the 2007 presidential election (-4.3 points). It is clear nonetheless that French citizens were concerned and engaged by the 2012 presidential election. However, within the presidential electoral cycle, turnout was at an intermediate level, between elections characterised by very high turnout (1965, 1974 and 2007) and the 2002 presidential election which was the one by far the most marked by abstention (28.4%). In any event, the abstention rate was slightly higher than average for the first round of presidential elections (+0.9 points). However, the high turnout levels in both rounds did not reach those of the beginning of the Fifth Republic, 84.7% in 1965 and 84.2% in 1974. Turnout was similar to, though slightly lower than, that recorded in the first rounds of the presidential elections won by the left and by François Mitterrand (81.1% in 1981 and 81.4% in 1988).

### High levels of mobilisation throughout the campaign in spite of political mistrust

The pre-campaign period for the 2012 election started well before the actual vote. It maintained the attention of voters with its frequent ups and downs, notably provoked by the political upheaval in the wake of the “DSK affair” in spring 2012. It was also particularly intense because of the party primaries organised by the PS and the *Parti Radical de Gauche* (Radical Left Party) for the first time in French election history in October 2011, and which functioned as a kind of election rehearsal. In fact, the presidential election occupied the political and media agendas for the better part of a year. The long and laborious process of choosing the candidates managed to keep a certain number of voters enthralled, determined to have their say, hoping to see either a political turnaround with a socialist victory or the renewal of the incumbent president’s mandate. Moreover, it soon became apparent that popular dissatisfaction found its expression in protest votes rather than abstention in the first round, with Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen the recipients of these votes.

Many polls and forecasts predicted a much higher abstention rate, with the highest predictions estimating one in three electors would abstain. This discrepancy is indicative of the difficulty in measuring abstention which, although it has become commonplace, remains

subject to normative judgments and the desire for social and cultural conformity. It also confirms the significant flux in electoral behaviour and its intermittence. For younger generations, particularly among the youngest, the electoral campaign was disappointing. Interviewed a few weeks before the first round, 55% of 18-24 year-olds, eligible to vote for the first time in a presidential election, said that the campaign did make them want to vote. However, 60% also said that it did not make them want to choose one candidate in particular, and 66% said that the candidates did not really deal with the problems of ordinary people (Ifop survey for ANACEJ, March 2012).

Despite the automatic voter registration process for 18 year-olds which has been in place since 1997, and in spite of campaigns to encourage voting specifically targeted at younger generations, fewer young people and fewer young men in particular were registered to vote than their elders. In 2012, 93% of French people were registered to vote in the first round of the presidential election, but among the 18-22 year-old age group only 89% of women and 88% of men were registered. For young men aged between 25 and 30 years old, this rate drops to 87%, whereas it is 91% for young women of the same age – a gap of 4 points.<sup>1</sup> More than three-quarters of those registered did turn out to vote (77%). Systematic abstention, like intermittent abstention, in one vote or the other remained marginal. Only 13% of those registered abstained in both rounds of the presidential election. Only 5% voted only in the first round, and 6% did so solely in the second round. A very large majority of young people registered turned out to vote: 69% of 18-24 year-olds voted in the first round of the presidential election.<sup>2</sup> However, they were still more likely to abstain than their elders. Nearly one young person (under 25 years old) out of five did not vote in either round of the election (19% compared to 13% for the electorate as a whole). But of all the electors it was the oldest that were the most likely to abstain: 25% of the over-75 age group did not vote in the election.<sup>3</sup>

Like abstention which also functions as a sign of political protest,<sup>4</sup> blank voting is one form of non-vote which expresses political discontent. Blank voting increased during the 1990s and, although it remains limited, in certain elections it can attract a significant number of voters. In the first round of the 2012 presidential election it was quite high, representing 1.5% of registered voters, even though it didn't reach the same levels as in 1995 (2.2% of registered voters) or 2002 (2.4%), as can be seen in Table 2. In the second round, however, it attracted many more electors (4.7%), a proportion equivalent to that reached in the second round in 1995, distinguished by the highest level of this kind of vote (4.8%). Within the total number of voters, 1.9% of electors in the first round and 5.8% in the second round opted for the blank vote in 2012.

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1. Insee, "Enquête participation électorale 2012", quoted by Xavier Niel and Liliane Lincot, "L'inscription et la participation électorales en 2012", *Insee Première*, 1411, September 2012.

2. Post-electoral poll by Cevipof, conducted on line by Opinion Way, among a representative sample of the French population (n = 1504), May 2012.

3. Insee, "Enquête participation électorale 2012".

4. On this, see Adélaïde Zulfikarpasic, "Le vote blanc: abstention civique ou expression politique?", *Revue française de science politique*, 51(1-2), 2001, 247-68.

**Table 2. Blank voting in presidential elections during the Fifth Republic (in %)**

Round	1965		1969		1974		1981		1988		1995		2002		2007		2012	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
% registered	0.9	2.3	1	4.4	0.8	1.2	1.3	2.5	1.6	3	2.2	4.8	2.4	4.2	1.2	3.5	1.5	4.7
% voting	1	2.7	1.3	6.4	0.9	1.3	1.6	2.9	2	3.6	2.8	6	3.4	5.4	1.4	4.2	1.9	5.8

Source: Official results, Ministry of the Interior

In spite of their mistrust of political figures and institutions, French voters thus took what was at stake in the election into account and judged its importance. The competition was intense. Although François Hollande's lead was comfortable throughout the campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy made up much of the difference in the final weeks. The election mobilised and engaged the public right up until the end: less so than in 2007 of course, but a very large majority of voters (71% in January and 67% still in April, according to Ifop) declared that they were consistently interested in the election and that it occupied a large part of their daily discussions. Two-thirds of them (66%) agreed that they often spoke about the campaign with their close friends and family, a quarter even admitting that it was a subject of conversation every day (BVA survey, 6 April 2012). As election day drew closer, one in two French voters emphasised the importance of the presidential competition for France among their reasons for voting (voting day survey, Ipsos, 19-21 April 2012). For this presidential election, turnout was to a certain extent guaranteed, unlike for all the other elections that occurred over Sarkozy's five-year term.

This high level of mobilisation, already visible well in advance of election day, was measured by Cevipof's *Présidoscopie* panel study, which followed a panel of voters between November 2011 and the spring of 2012 when the election took place, over the course of ten waves of interviews.<sup>1</sup> As early as the first wave, during the first half of November, 80% of panellists declared that they were quite certain they would vote. This proportion remained reasonably stable and constant throughout the period under observation, with a slight increase (+6 points) from the seventh wave on, which corresponded to the beginning of the official campaign. This high level of electoral mobilisation is in striking contrast to the indecision and hesitancy voters showed regarding their choice of candidate. In the first wave of the study, 57% of electors acknowledged that they might change their minds, and in the ninth wave – just two days before the first round – 19% of them still thought they might. This shows that voter mobilisation does not rule out uncertainty about who to vote for. However, from the first wave onwards, a link could be observed between certainty of choice and certainty of voting. Among panellists having expressed a definitive choice, only 10% of them still said they were unsure whether they would vote or not. Amongst those who had not made their choice, nearly a third (28%) were also uncertain as to whether they would go to the polls. Above all, it appears that, more than for any other choice, the choice to abstain from voting is a last-minute decision for many. Whereas in the *Présidoscopie* 12% of panellists declared that they had made their voting decision in the week preceding the election, or on

1. The *Présidoscopie* study is a longitudinal study following 3,309 panellists between November 2011 and June 2012, documenting the processes of their electoral decision-making by re-interviewing them twelve times. This study was conducted by Ipsos-Logica Business Consulting for Cevipof, Fondapol, the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and the newspaper *Le Monde*.

election day itself, 43% of those who would ultimately abstain made their decision during this period.<sup>1</sup>

The sociological and political characteristics of electors who did not vote in the first round of the election are worth examining, as are changes in electoral mobilisation over the whole period covering the three most recent presidential elections since 2002. However, before looking at either of these elements, it should be noted that a study of the distribution of abstention over the national territory reveals certain regional disparities that deserve closer attention. Certain regional differences observed over the long term have been confirmed.<sup>2</sup> The eastern parts of France, the southeast and the northeast in particular, are the areas most affected by abstention. This is a France cut in half by a diagonal line from Saint-Malo to Grenoble. On one side, on the east, high abstention rates correspond to a de-industrialised France that is urban or semi-urban. On the other side, on the west, in areas more representative of rural France, the abstention rates are lower. It is clear that turnout varies according to regional political culture. It is more developed in regions such as the southwest and Aquitaine, marked by a traditional affiliation with the left, than in the centre west, which traditionally leans more to the right. Finally, overseas territories including Corsica are characterised by ever-increasing abstention rates.<sup>3</sup>

### An “intermediate” level of mobilisation in the presidential electoral cycle of the Fifth Republic and a decrease from 2007

When considered in the context of a ten-year electoral cycle, compared with the two presidential elections that preceded it (2002 and 2007, both relatively atypical for different reasons), the 2012 election was characterised by an intermediate level of electoral turnout. It marked the end of the contrasting forms of participation that had characterised the two previous elections; the first marked by widespread protest, a vote expressing refusal of the parties on offer and high abstention rates, and the second by a vote designed to break with past political traditions, a desire for change and overwhelming participation.<sup>4</sup>

1. See Pascal Perrineau, Brice Teinturier, “Le moment du choix électoral” in Perrineau (ed.), *La décision électorale en 2012*, 169-89.

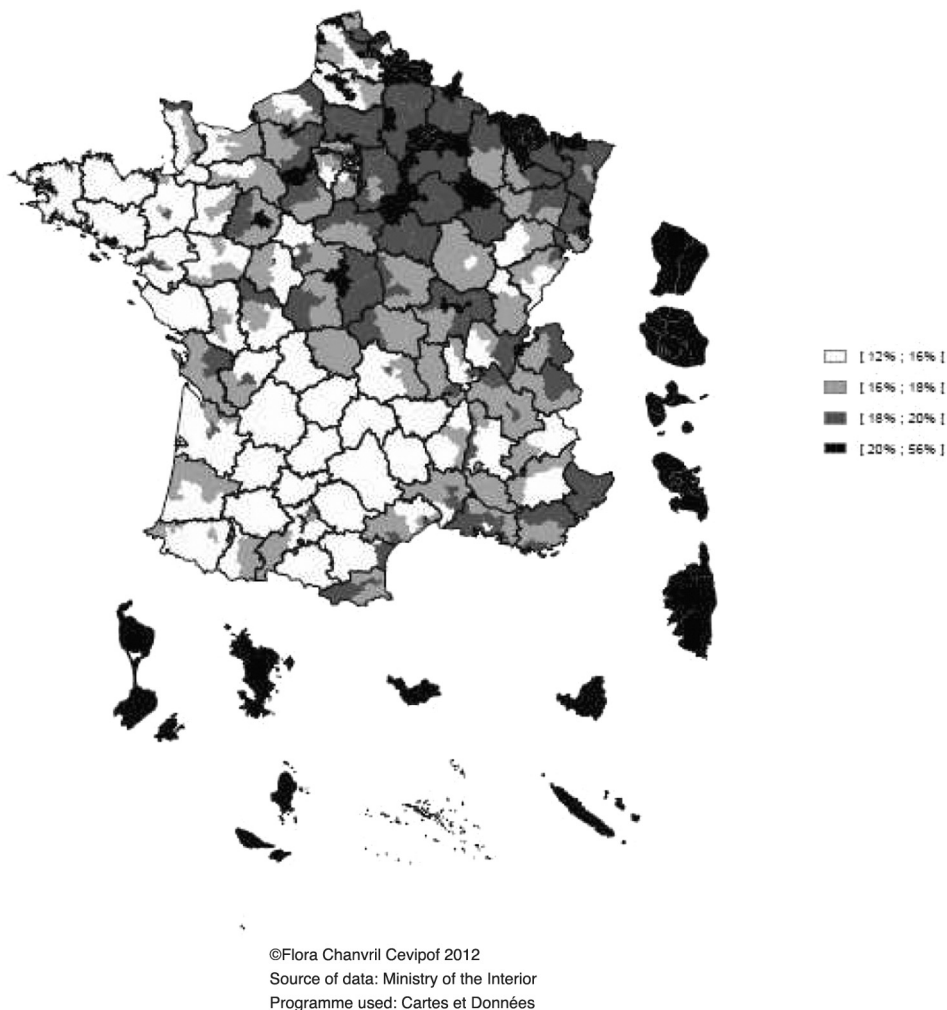
2. On the characteristics of French electoral geography, see Alain Lancelot, *L’abstentionnisme électoral en France* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1968); and Claude Leleu, *Géographie des élections française depuis 1936* (Paris: PUF, 1971). More recently, see the work of Pierre Bréchon, *La France aux urnes* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, 2009); and Michel Bussi, Jérôme Fourquet, Céline Colange, “Analyse et compréhension du vote lors des élections présidentielles de 2012. L’apport de la géographie électorale”, *Revue française de science politique*, 62(5-6), 2012, 941-63.

3. This part of the electorate represents more than 1.5 million voters overseas and 1 million in metropolitan France, a little more than 5% of all French voters. See Yvan Combeau (ed.) *Le vote dans l’outre-mer* (Paris: Quatre Chemins, 2007), and Christiane Rafidinarivo, “Le vote des outre-mers”, *Notes du Cevipof*, 16, March 2012, available online at: [http://www.cevipof.com/fichier/p\\_publication/960/publication\\_pdf\\_noterafidinarivo.2.1.pdf](http://www.cevipof.com/fichier/p_publication/960/publication_pdf_noterafidinarivo.2.1.pdf). Among the territories with the highest levels of abstention in the first round of the 2012 presidential election were Saint-Martin/Saint-Barthélemy (63.5%), French Polynesia (50.6%), Mayotte and Guyana (both 49%). The lowest abstention rates were found in Réunion (34.4%) and Wallis and Futuna (27.9%) (source: Ministry of the Interior). French citizens abroad, who make up a little more than 1 million registered voters, abstained in very large numbers: 60.9% in the first round and 57.8% in the second round (source: Ministry of the Interior). Unlike in metropolitan France, a clear increase in mobilisation between the first and second rounds of the presidential election and stronger participation in the second round can be observed: +3.1 points among overseas citizens, +7.3 points in La Réunion, +9.6 points in Guadeloupe or in French Polynesia, and +13.4 points in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon.

4. See the three publications in the “Chroniques électorales” series: Pascal Perrineau, Colette Ysmal (eds), *Le vote de tous les refus. Les élections présidentielle et législatives de 2002* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003);



**Figure 2. Map of abstention in the first round of the 2012 presidential election**



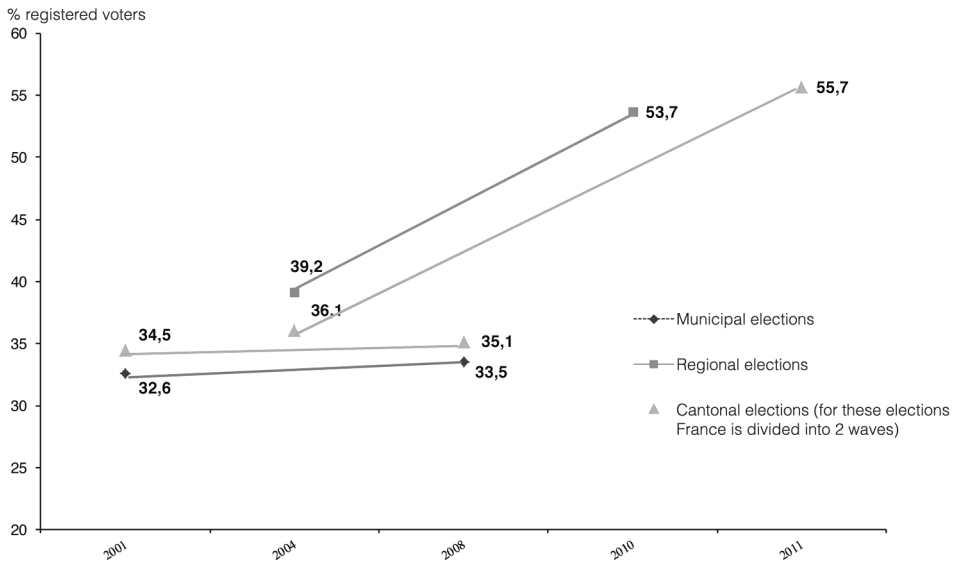
The 2007 presidential election was marked by a very high turnout, on a par with levels observed at the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Breaking with the cycles of abstention of previous years, and particularly with the low turnout observed during the 2002 presidential election (and its well-known consequence, when Jean-Marie Le Pen made it through to the second round), mobilisation was at its peak, across all geographical areas and all segments of society. However, this renewed mobilisation was short-lived: the legislative elections held directly afterwards and all subsequent intermediary elections registered record levels of abstention, without exception (see Figure 3). The 2012 presidential election broke with this

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Pascal Perrineau (ed.), *Le vote de rupture. Les élections présidentielle et législatives de 2007* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008); and *Le vote normal. Les élections présidentielle et législatives d'avril-juin 2012* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2013). I have written chapters on the analysis of electoral turnout in each of these three volumes.

cycle of abstention that had marked Sarkozy's five-year term. It once again showed a level of electoral participation consistent with this type of election. However, compared to the mobilisation of French citizens in 2007, it was nonetheless characterised by significant decreases in turnout in all segments of society.

**Figure 3. Changes in abstention rates in local elections between 2002 and 2011 (in %)**



Source: Official results, Ministry of the Interior

Between 2002 and 2007, abstention rates declined for all ages and social groups, sometimes spectacularly (-14 points for the 18-24 year-old age group, -17 points for over 65 year-olds; -19 points for mid-level occupations, -14 points for clerical workers, -35 points for students, -30 points for the unemployed). Between 2007 and 2012, the rate of abstention increased for most categories of voters (+11 points among 18-24 year-olds, +23 points for students, +9 points for senior managers, +5 points for the unemployed). It is important to note the high increase in abstention among the most educated categories (+9 points), but also among those in senior managerial posts and intellectual professions (+9 points). This is a reminder of the existence of political and protest-based abstention, stemming from those sections of the electorate that are the most educated and most politicised. This phenomenon was particularly visible during the 2002 presidential election. Compared to 2007, only a few categories did not experience an increase in abstention in 2012, mainly older voters who were more mobilised this time (-7 points for over 65 year-olds) (see Table 3).

In 2007, the substantial increase in turnout extended well beyond the politicised electorate. The proportion of those abstaining who said they did not feel close to any political party had decreased by 38 points compared to 2002. Nothing like this occurred in 2012. Abstention appeared much more marked in sections of the population that were the most removed and the most distant from the political system: +9 points in abstention among those not at all

**Table 3. Changes in the sociology of abstaining voters in the first round of the presidential election 2002-2007-2012 (in %)**

	2002	2007	2012	Gap	
				2007/2002	2012/2007
<b>Gender</b>					
Men	28	18	16	-10	-2
Women	31	16	20	-15	+4
<b>Age</b>					
18-24	34	20	31	-14	+11
25-34	34	22	25	-12	+3
35-49	29	18	22	-11	+4
50-64	26	12	14	-14	+2
Over 65	29	12	5	-17	-7
<b>Profession</b>					
Farmers	31	12	-	-19	-
Artisans, shopkeepers	31	19	24	-12	+5
Liberal professions, senior management	30	10	19	-20	+9
Mid-level occupations	30	11	12	-19	+1
Clerical workers	33	19	23	-14	+4
Workers	28	20	23	-8	+3
<b>Status</b>					
Private-sector workers	29	18	22	-11	+4
Public-sector workers	29	13	22	-16	+9
Self-employed	32	13	15	-19	+2
Unemployed	30	25	30	-5	+5
Students	28	12	35	-16	+23
<b>Qualifications</b>					
No qualifications, primary school certificate	33	19	19	-14	=
Vocational training	31	18	16	-13	-2
High school certificate (Baccalaureate)	28	14	21	-14	+7
College (Bac + 2)	27	16	16	-11	=
University degree	27	9	18	-18	+9
<b>Overall</b>	28.4%	16.2%	21.6%		

Source: PEF (2002), Cevipof, FNSP, CIDSP, Cecop, Ministry of the Interior, Wave 2 and post-presidential election survey 2002 (n=4017); PEF (2007) Cevipof, Ministry of the Interior, Wave 2 and post-presidential election survey 2007 (n=4000); Post-electoral survey 2012, conducted online Cevipof (n=1504). Socio-demographic and political weighting.

interested in politics, +6 points among those with no party affiliation, +4 points among those who did not situate themselves either on the left or on the right (see Table 3). The link between a voter's level of politicisation and the decision to vote or not is particularly strong in this respect.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, all political groups recorded a re-mobilisation of their potential electorate. However, in 2012, a differential form of mobilisation governed by individual voters' partisan or ideological allegiances was observed. Left-wing voters turned out more (-3 points abstention compared to 2007) than right-wing voters (+4 points abstention compared to 2007). On the left, those close to the extreme left clearly snubbed the polls (+13 points compared to 2007), whereas those close to the Communist Party (PC, *Front de Gauche*) (-2 points), the Green Party (*Europe Ecologie-Les Verts*) (-2 points), and especially the Socialist Party (-8 points) increased their levels of mobilisation compared to 2007. Of all these political electorates, socialist voters had the highest level of turnout: only 5% of them abstained. MoDem voters were more likely to abstain than in 2007 (+7 points), which might partly explain François Bayrou's poor performance in the first round.

### **Sociology and the political characteristics of those who abstained in the first round of the 2012 election**

The decline in turnout compared with 2007 could be felt across most segments of the population. However, there were certain significant gaps within the electorate that confirmed the existence of a generational form of abstention which was probably more pronounced in 2012 than it was in 2007. Those belonging to the 18-24 year-old age group were much more likely not to vote than in 2007 (31% compared to 20%, +11 points), and this much more so than their elders, especially the oldest group (+26 points abstention compared to the over 65 year-old group). More than a third of students (35%) did not vote. Although young people and generational issues were considered decisive in Hollande's campaign, many young people chose not to vote: many more than in 2007. Other significant differences confirming the persistence of sociological abstention linked to social and professional conditions of insertion include the fact that 30% of the unemployed did not vote, whereas senior management, the liberal professions and especially mid-level occupations voted in much greater numbers. But what this election showed in particular was the fact that although abstention is always linked to social integration, it nevertheless seems to be spreading to all socio-professional groups. The same percentage of abstention is present

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1. The link between social competence and political competence has been highlighted in a number of classic texts in French political sociology to explain the decision not to vote. From the perspective of the sociology of domination developed by Pierre Bourdieu, Daniel Gaxie's book *Le cens caché* (Paris: Seuil, 1978) sheds light on the processes of political exclusion which are closely linked to individuals' modes of social integration. More recently, in *La démocratie de l'abstention* (Paris: Folio/Gallimard, 2007), Céline Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen have highlighted the socio-economic and cultural foundations underpinning electoral de-mobilisation, a phenomenon that is particularly prevalent in working-class communities. Guy Michelat and Michel Simon account for the effect of social determinants in their analyses of political participation, but they demonstrate the existence of a specifically political dimension to the sense of competence, independent of social status, thus nuancing social determinism and stressing the importance of political attributes that make up a citizen (interest in politics, feeling that politics is not a complicated thing, identifying with a political party, etc.). See Guy Michelat, Michel Simon, "Les 'sans réponse' aux questions politiques: rôles imposés et compensation des handicaps", *L'Année sociologique*, 32, 1982, 81-114.

among those who have few or no qualifications as among those who have university degrees (19% and 18% respectively).

In the second round, comparing the socio-demographic profiles of those who voted and those who abstained reveals similar patterns to what was observed in the first round. Younger electors were less mobilised (36% of students did not vote), whereas older voters voted in huge numbers. The self-employed voted more than employees (14% abstained, compared to 18% of employees in the private sector and 20% in the public sector).

I have highlighted the various faces of abstention in previous research, which partly addresses the distinction between sociological abstention and political abstention developed in French electoral sociology. In this work, I have distinguished between abstention “outside the political game”, characterised by a lack of social integration and manifest political indifference, and abstention “inside the political game”, characterised by a certain level of political competence and politicisation. The first is more structural and sociological in nature; the second is more cyclical, being primarily political and protest-based in nature.<sup>1</sup> Abstention in a particular election thus does not cover a homogenous ensemble of attitudes and behaviour. Compared to 2007, the political characteristics of those who did not vote on 22 April 2012 reflect more sharply the signs of abstention characterised by a sense of indifference to and removal from politics. The 21.6% of French citizens who did not vote do not all share the same political dispositions, and have a much more distant connection to politics and different concerns than those who voted (see Table 4). Their voting habits are less well established: 43% of them declared that they only vote in certain elections, or in none at all (compared to 6% of those who voted). They followed the election campaign less than those who voted: 63% of voters said they followed the campaign every day or nearly every day, while only 38% of non-voters did so. They showed less interest in politics and were more removed from any kind of ideological or partisan affiliation: 45% refused to situate themselves either on the left or on the right (compared to 25% of voters), and 47% said they were not affiliated with any party (compared to 21% of voters). Their level of political mistrust was very high (+40 points compared to those who voted). Many of them also declared that they believed that democracy functions poorly or not at all in France (47% compared to 26% of those who voted). The political unease of non-voters is without doubt a fundamental element in explaining their withdrawal from electoral participation.

Among the reasons invoked by non-voters to explain their choice on the eve of the election, dissatisfaction with the candidates present was the most common. More than a third of them said that none of the candidates appeared convincing, and one quarter (25%) considered that their vote would not change anything, regardless of the result. Abstention expressing discontent or even sanction was therefore significant, covering 24% of responses (Ipsos survey, 21 April 2012). The impact of the fact that the first round took place during the

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1. On the relevance of the distinction between sociological abstention and political abstention see Alain Lancelot, *L'abstentionnisme électoral en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968); see also Françoise Subileau, “L'abstentionnisme: apolitisme ou stratégie?”, in Nonna Mayer (ed.) *Les modèles explicatifs du vote* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 245-67. Concerning the distinction between abstention “outside the political game” and abstention “inside the political game” see Jérôme Jaffré, Anne Muxel, “S'abstenir: hors du jeu ou dans le jeu politique?”, in Pierre Bréchon, Annie Laurent, Pascal Perrineau (eds), *Les cultures politiques des Français* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2000), 19-53. For an understanding of protest-based abstention, see my article, “L'abstention: déficit démocratique ou vitalité politique?”, *Pouvoirs*, 120, 2006, 43-55.

**Table 4. Changes in political characteristics of non-voters in the first round of the presidential election (2002-2007-2012) (in %)**

	2002	2007	2012	Gap	
				2007/2002	2012/2007
<i>Interest in politics</i>					
Very interested	18	8	9	-10	+1
Quite interested	23	11	13	-12	+2
Not that interested	34	21	25	-13	+4
Not at all interested	56	32	41	-24	+9
<i>Party affiliation</i>					
Extreme left	33	18	31	-15	+13
Communist Party	25	12	10	-13	-2
Socialist Party	28	13	5	-15	-8
Green Party, EELV	38	25	23	-13	-2
UDF-MoDem	18	15	22	-3	+7
RPR-UMP	26	11	12	-15	+1
FN-MNR	18	14	13	-4	-1
No party	65	27	33	-38	+6
<i>Political position</i>					
Left	27	14	11	-13	-3
Right	24	12	16	-12	+4
Neither left nor right	38	24	28	-14	+4
<i>Overall</i>	28.4%	16.2%	21.6%	-12.2%	+5.4

Source: PEF (2002), Cevipof, FNSP, CIDSF, Cecop, Ministry of the Interior, Wave 2 and post-presidential election survey 2002 (n=4,017); PEF (2007) Cevipof, Ministry of the Interior, Wave 2 and post-presidential election survey 2007 (n=4,000); Post-electoral survey 2012, conducted online Cevipof (n=1,504). Socio-demographic and political weighting.

school holidays was also measured, but it remained relatively marginal.<sup>1</sup> Political reasons largely predominated over practical reasons (18% said that they would be absent on voting day). Amongst those who did not vote in the first round, 29% did vote in the second, whereas 71% abstained a second time. Amongst the 29% who did vote, their choices were fairly evenly distributed between the two candidates, although Hollande was slightly favoured (15% of votes against 12% for Sarkozy; 2% blank votes).<sup>2</sup>

1. On this point see Eric Dubois, "Holidays and turnout at presidential elections in France: an update", *French Politics*, 10(2), 2012, 181-7.

2. Post-electoral survey 2012, conducted online by Cevipof.

**Table 5. Non-voters compared to voters: their attitudes and political behaviour (in %)**

	Non-voters	Voters	Gap
Are interested or very interested in politics	43	73	-30
Followed the campaign (nearly) every day	38	63	-25
Don't trust either the left or the right to govern	71	41	+30
Are in the habit of only voting in some elections or not at all	43	6	+37
Do not position themselves on either the left or the right	45	25	+20
Are not affiliated with any party	47	21	+26
Consider that in France democracy doesn't work well or doesn't work at all	47	26	+21
Consider that political leaders are not concerned with people like them	87	74	+13

Source: 2012 Post-electoral survey conducted online, Cevipof (n=1,504)

As for every election, sociological and political factors combined to explain the dynamics of abstention on 22 April 2012. Many other parameters must also be taken into account: delayed decision-making, increased perplexity, and weakened loyalties and party affiliations.<sup>1</sup> The “puzzle” of electoral turnout remains difficult to reconstruct with certainty.<sup>2</sup> There are many parameters, both structural and cyclical, to take into account and it is impossible to retain only one paradigm or explicative model for voting (versus non-voting). Of course, the resource model (SES) which is based on the effects of social capital and the sociological predispositions of individuals has not lost its explicative relevance. But other models, which borrow from psychological or economic paradigms (such as rational choice) should also be used. Above all, explicitly political factors surrounding an electoral context are a reminder of the fact that voting – and therefore non-voting – is always a reaction to particular circumstances and to the particular set of candidates and parties on offer.

Nonetheless, an attempt can be made to construct a hierarchy of the different explicative factors (see Table 6). Political predispositions, evaluated in terms of attitudes or behaviour, appear predominant here. By far the most decisive factor is voting habits, which are forged and anchored during the political socialisation of individuals. We know that the habit of participating in elections is learnt early in life, in the years that follow gaining the right to vote. When this does not occur, a looser connection is established with the electoral act, and abstention becomes a regular occurrence throughout the individual's lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Abstention is also closely connected to the voter's level of involvement in the campaign. Finally, one's attitude towards the political system is decisive: distance from the party system and political

1. For an overview of recent analyses within French electoral sociology, see the following works: Bruno Cautrès, Anne Muxel (eds) *Comment les électeurs font-ils leur choix? Le Panel électoral français 2007* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po 2009, published in English under the title *The New Voter: France and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2011)); Patrick Lehinque, *Le vote. Approches sociologiques de l'institution et des comportements électoraux* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011); Nonna Mayer, *Sociologie des comportements politiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009).

2. Richard Brody used this expression in 1978 for the first time. See his chapter, “The puzzle of political participation in America”, in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978), 287-324.

3. On this point, see M. Franklin, *Voter turnout*.

mistrust pave the way for abstention. Social factors also play a role but they are secondary. Age and profession have an indisputable impact, but their effects are less decisive than those measured by the political variables. The weakness of the link observed between education level and abstention reflects the spread of abstention throughout numerous segments of society and the diversification of its forms of expression. This broadening of abstention is a nationwide phenomenon in which the size of the urban area and differences between rural and urban areas have become of secondary importance.

**Table 6. Factors explaining abstention**

	Cramer's V
Voting habits	0.460
Follows the electoral campaign	0.320
Party affiliation	0.278
Political trust	0.232
Profession	0.226
Age	0.222
Political position	0.179
Professional status	0.166
Level of income	0.126
Opinion of the functioning of democracy	0.123
Urban area	0.069
Level of education	0.054

Key: Cramer's V enables the creation of a hierarchy between explicative variables according to the intensity of their link to the dependent variable (here, abstention). Cramer's V is situated between 0 and 1; the closer to 1, the stronger the link, although it is difficult to obtain values close to 1; 0.15 already indicates a strong link.

Source: 2012 Post-electoral survey, conducted on-line, Cevipof (n=1,504).

Abstention has become commonplace and generalised. It is now part of a range of new practices and "acts of citizenship" within which intermittent voting has become the norm.<sup>1</sup> Voters abstain for a variety of reasons and abstention appeals to various sections of the electorate characterized by different types of voting behaviour. Depending on the election, sociological abstention and political abstention have blended together in different ways to form a complex combination. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the affirmation of political abstention based on protest and attracting a significant proportion of regular politicised electors, has made a strong contribution to the general spread of non-voting in society.<sup>2</sup> In 1995, the proportion of protest-based abstention represented two-thirds of all non-voting

1. The notion of "acts of citizenship" is borrowed from Engin F. Isin, Greg M. Nielsen (eds), *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2008). It refers to a range of different actions that are often made in protest or contestation, and which reflect a deep transformation of democratic citizenship. For a greater understanding of changes in attitudes to voting, see also the book co-written by Yves Déloye and Olivier Ihl, *L'acte de vote* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008).

2. Political abstention based on protest is measured in the surveys by an indicator that was constructed to distinguish non-voters who declared they were interested in politics and identified with a political party from those who said they were not interested in politics and did not identify with any party. The former use abstention



behaviour. It stemmed from politicised sections of the electorate characterized by a degree of political sophistication. By contrast, abstention of a structural and sociological nature was prevalent among less socially and politically integrated individuals, and was less widespread (8.1%) (see Table 7). Political abstention reached its peak during 2002's presidential election (18.7% compared to 8.5% of sociological abstention), breaking the record for the highest number of non-voters in the first round of a presidential election (28.4%). As a form of protest, it was revealing of the degree of political unease felt by French citizens towards their governments. More importantly, it led to the socialist Lionel Jospin being expelled from the race and the leader of the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen, making it through to the second round, thus causing a massive shock to the entire electoral system. In 2007, the high level of electoral turnout and the corresponding low abstention rates (-13.2 compared to 2002) suggested the renewal of a more civic-minded attitude towards elections and more solid political trust. In fact, the proportion of abstention by politicised voters decreased much more sharply than sociological and structural abstention did among less politicised voters (-3.9 points). The latter decreased also, which shows the strong levels of mobilisation among French voters in general in 2007, including among less politicised voters who tend to be more distant from politics. It is clear that these two kinds of abstention were more or less of equal measure.

**Table 7. Changes in types of abstention in the first round of presidential elections (1995-2012) (in %)**

	Protest-based abstention (inside the political game)	Sociological abstention (outside the political game)
1995	12.5	8.1
2002	18.7	8.5
2007	5.5	4.6
2012	6.4	11.5

Sources: Post-electoral surveys: Cevipof (1995); PEF (2002, 2007). 2012 post-electoral survey carried out online.

In 2012, the politicised segments of the electorate voted in the election, with abstention among these voters remaining limited (6.4%). On the other hand, the proportion of sociological abstention was almost twice as high (11.5%). Observation of the last four presidential elections reveals that this kind of abstention was the most prevalent in 2012. Whereas the 2007 presidential election had succeeded in bringing voters “outside the political game” to the polls, the 2012 presidential election did not manage to do the same among the most socially fragile segments of the electorate, nor among those most removed from the political

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to express their discontent within a particular electoral context, to express disapproval of the candidates and parties on offer and to sanction the government in power. By not voting, the latter express their withdrawal and distance from politics, which is characteristic of a type of abstention that is not so much political as sociological. A comparable phenomenon has been observed in the United States, identified in the work of Jack C. Doppels and Ellen Shearer, *Non Voters. America's No-Shows* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999). The doers, one of the five types of non-voters identified by these researchers, are culturally well-equipped, involved in their communities, and well-informed. They are the equivalent of those who abstain “inside the political game” in the French context.

system. Political protest and discontent were expressed through the vote. Abstention was present less as a form of expression than as a sign of indifference and withdrawal.

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The 2012 presidential election did in fact mobilise voters, but by the time the legislative elections came around in June of that year, they had rapidly become de-mobilised again. This election was marked by abstention levels that set a record for the Fifth Republic: 42.7% non-voters in the first round and 44.6% in the second round (see Figure 1). The reform of the five-year presidential term and the inversion of the electoral calendar in 2000<sup>1</sup> clearly created prime conditions for this kind of defection. Legislative elections have become second-rate polls, operating in the shadow of the presidential elections that precede them. They are seen as ratifications of the choice of president, which is considered by voters as the decisive choice, establishing quasi-automatic congruence between executive and legislative powers. They no longer mobilise electors as they used to: more than two out of five voters did not turn out to vote in 2012.

The ups and downs of electoral turnout in spring 2012 confirm the arrival of an intermittent electorate in the French democratic landscape. This model clearly appears to be establishing itself, particularly among the younger generations. Two-thirds of 18-24 year-olds (66% in the first round and 63% in the second round)<sup>2</sup> did not vote in the legislative elections, whereas only one-third abstained in the first round of the presidential election. This new model is marked by hesitation and perplexity among voters up until the very last moment (almost one in two voters made their decision on polling day itself), by intermittent voting and by abstention, which has increasingly become an electoral response in itself. The model is redefining not only the role and meaning of the vote in our democracies but also, more broadly, contemporary understanding of civic-mindedness and citizenship.

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— Anne Muxel —

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1. The 2002 reform reduced the presidential mandate from seven to five years and moved the legislative election to a date after the presidential election. This has meant that the newly elected president is in a position to form a government favourable to him- or herself rather than inheriting one formed prior to the election.  
2. Ipsos survey, voting day, June 2012.