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A Legislative Majority for the Future President?

Revisiting the Phenomenon of Honeymoon Elections Under the Fifth Republic

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Since the French presidential term was shortened from 7 years to 5 in 2002, the president and representatives in France's lower house of parliament (the National Assembly) have each been elected to five-year terms, and legislative elections are now scheduled "just after" the presidential election. In the past two decades, the party of the new or reelected president has systematically triumphed in the legislative elections held a few weeks later. It is as though these back-to-back two-round elections have coalesced to form a single four-round electoral sequence, with the result of each round determining the outcome of the one that follows. The winner of the presidential elections has thus enjoyed a certain "state of grace" that has enabled him to emerge victorious in the ensuing legislative race. Is this "honeymoon" election scenario destined to repeat itself in the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for April 10 and 24 and June 12 and 19, 2022?

An Electoral Cycle Designed to Avoid Divided Government

France's Fifth Republic has been a semi-presidential system since the Constitution was modified in 1962 at the initiative of Charles de Gaulle to allow the President to be elected by direct universal suffrage (Elgie 1999). Until 2002, the President was elected for seven-year terms and members of the National Assembly for five-year terms. In the first two decades of the Republic, this had no institutional impact whatsoever. The French political game of the era was essentially a very simple one: each election pitted the Left against the Right, and in the end, the Right always won. Until 1981, the Right held on to the presidency while also systematically sealing a majority in the National Assembly, thereby facilitating political coherence between the President, the Prime Minister, and the National Assembly. Upon assuming the presidency in 1981, François Mitterrand immediately dissolved the National Assembly to secure a parliamentary majority and enable his administration to govern. The socialist party then successfully won an absolute majority in the National Assembly, marking France's first "honeymoon" elections. Thus, from 1962 to 1986, the French President systematically enjoyed a parliamentary majority that allowed him to govern the country.

Yet François Mitterrand's election signaled the start of a new era for the Fifth Republic, which would be characterized by the systematic defeat of the parliamentary majority in place in the following elections. Between 1981 and 2002, power systematically shifted with each parliamentary election cycle. Each of the three seven-year presidential terms in the 1980s and 1990s systematically included a period of joint majority rule by the president and the parliament and another period of divided government (*cohabitation*): $7 = 5 + 2$ (for each of François Mitterrand's seven-year terms) or $2 + 5 = 7$ (for Jacques Chirac's first seven-year term).

The extended duration of the third period of divided government—spanning from 1997 to 2002—showed that it was no longer a simple parenthesis until the next presidential elections. Instead, the risk was real that it might become the norm, spelling the demise of the constitutional framework instituted by Charles de Gaulle. The peril was made all the more dire by the fact that the next legislative elections were slated for March 2002, just weeks ahead of the presidential vote in April. Two major successive reforms have been advocated and adopted to prevent this risk: In 2000, former President Giscard d'Estaing and then socialist Prime Minister

Lionel Jospin, with support from influential pundits, succeeded in forcing a politically weakened Jacques Chirac to assent to a shift to a five-year presidential term meant to “modernize” French politics. Next, the electoral calendar was inverted to avoid any “risk” of cohabitation, restoring the “spirit” of the Fifth Republic.

The two rounds of the presidential elections and the two rounds of the legislative elections now coalesced into a single four-round electoral sequence (Parodi 2007; Dupoirier and Sauger 2010). Following the presidential election, the “momentum” was now such that the President’s party was virtually guaranteed to win the legislative elections. This was a foreseeable outcome: it had already occurred in the dissolutions of 1981 and—albeit less spectacularly—1988 (but it is true that François Mitterand’s statement that, “It is not a good thing for a single party to govern,” made during his presidential campaign in which he advocated for a “united France,” had not encourage turnout from socialist voters). On April 21, 2002, on the eve of the first round of the presidential elections, Lionel Jospin was eliminated. Jacques Chirac emerged ahead of the pack in the first round with under 20% of the votes cast. Two weeks later, in the first sequential elections, he was re-elected against Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round with upwards of 80% of the vote. In June, his UMP (*Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle* – “Union for the Presidential Majority”) party and its allies won 365 legislative seats (63.3%).

The Mechanism Behind French Honeymoon Elections

This scenario is not unique to France and has now been well documented. Using data from approximately thirty recent elections in “pure” and “semi-” presidential systems, Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera (2017) have shown that the “honeymoon surge” is dependent on the length of time between the two elections, empirically devising the following equation:

$$R_p = 1.20 - 0.725E \quad (1)$$

where R_p is the vote share of the president’s party in the legislative elections divided by the president’s vote share in the first round of the presidential election; and E is the number of months between presidential and legislative elections (0 means simultaneous elections—on the same day).

Stated another way, based on the data collected by Shugart and Taagepera, whenever E is close to zero (i.e., when legislative voting takes place “just after” the presidential elections, as it does in France), legislative elections theoretically enable the President’s party to achieve a score that is 20% higher on average than the new President’s score in the first round of the presidential elections. In France, however, this surge is considerably higher. The presidential party scores an average of 9 points higher than the President himself—an increase of over one third of the vote share.

Table 1: Presidential and legislative elections results in the first round since 1981 (in % of votes cast – France total)

	Presidential election, Round 1	Legislative elections, Round 1	Difference in % points	Difference in %
1981: Mitterrand/PS and allies	25.8	37.4	+11.6	+45%
1988: Mitterrand/PS and allies	34.1	35.9	+1.8	+5%
2002: Chirac/UMP and allies	19.9	33.8	+13.9	+70%
2007: Sarkozy/UMP and allies	31.2	41.9	+10.7	+34%
2012: Hollande/PS and allies	28.6	36.4	+7.8	+42%
2017: Macron/LREM and allies	24.0	32.3	+8.3	+35%
Mean	27.3	36.3	+9.0	+39%

Source: Laurent de Boissieu, <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives.htm>

The legislative elections do not only confirm the results of the presidential race. Rather, they profoundly amplify the outcome in terms of both votes and seats. But what are the mechanisms at work?

From 1981, it became apparent that the presidential party's victory in the legislative elections is less the result of the defection—temporary or otherwise—of the voters who supported defeated candidates in the presidential race, than the consequence of differential turnout, with supporters of vanquished presidential candidates heading to the polls in far lower numbers (Goguel 1983). This phenomenon was also observed in 2017, when an Ifop survey found that a mere 45% of Marine Le Pen's and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's voters turned out for the first round of legislative voting, compared to 68% of Emmanuel Macron's supporters.

It is as though the drama of the presidential race has quenched their thirst for politics for the next five years, leaving them weary until the next presidential race. Yet there is more to it than that: voters also have the impression that the outcome of the elections is all but a foregone conclusion. As Shugart (2017) notes, “The purpose of the upcoming election is to ratify the new executive's direction, not to be a second chance for an alternative vision”. This feeling has only intensified over time. The gap in turnout levels between the two elections, which stood at just over 10 points in 1981, has now regularly topped 20 points since the late 2000s, thus mechanically favoring the victory of the President's party (Table 2).

Table 2: Abstention in legislative elections from 1978 to 2017 (France total)

	Presidential election, Round 1	Legislative elections, Round 1	Difference in % points
1978		17.2	
1981	18.9	29.7	+10.8
1986*		22.0	
1988	18.6	34.2	+15.6
1993		32.3	
1997		28.5	
2002	28.4	35.6	+7.2
2007	16.3	39.6	+23.3
2012	20.5	42.8	+22.3
2017	22.3	51.3	+29.0
Mean	20.8	33.3	+18.0

*Only the 1986 legislative elections featured a party-list proportional representation race held at the level of each *département*.

Source: Laurent de Boissieu, <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives.htm>

In addition, France's legislative election system greatly contributes to forging a parliamentary majority. In practice, the two-round electoral system used in France is even more brutal than the single-round voting system used in the United Kingdom (country of the cube law), in which, according to Taagepera (1973), amplification long took the form of an exponent of 3 or:

$$S(a)/S(b) = (V_a/V_b)^3 \quad (2)$$

where $V(a)$ and $S(a)$ respectively correspond to the share of votes and seats won by party (a) and $V(b)$ and $S(b)$ to those won by party (b).

But in France, an analysis based on the results of the six legislative elections held under the two-round majority system between 1978 and 2002 shows that the seat-vote equation did not follow the “cube law,” but instead generally obeyed the “fourth exponent law,” meaning that during this period the amplification effect was stronger in France than in the U.K. (Dolez and Laurent 2005).

Two factors explain this phenomenon.

The first, strategic voting, is not unique to France. It contributes to marginalizing candidates, district by district, with ostensibly low chances of being elected, or at least of making it to the second round (the threshold for qualification in a district being set at 12.5% of registered voters). Competition thus tends to focus on one or two major political parties, or on one or two major alliances in which electoral coalitions have formed (Di Virgilio A. et al., 2015). The result was that until 2012, in the vast majority of cases, the second round consisted of a duel between the Left and the Right, ordinarily between one candidate from the PS and another from the UMP.

The second factor, however, is unique to France, clearly distinguishing it in this respect from the United Kingdom (and even more so from the United States). In France, legislative races are not particularly “local” in nature, which concretely means two things:

(1) The scores for political parties in each constituency mirror their national averages relatively closely. In other words, for a given political party, variations between different districts have been the result of the local specificities of the French election map and the quality of the local

foothold of incumbent contenders (Loonis 2006), especially important in the case of multiple office holders—a particularity of the French system, which, until recently, allowed mayors of large cities to also simultaneously serve in the National Assembly (Foucault 2006). Throughout the 2000s and into the early 2010s, these two phenomena helped consolidate the power of the two major governing parties—the UMP and the PS—over French politics;

(2) The same shifts in opinion have been observed in districts throughout the country: when the Left has gained support, it has gained support everywhere, and the same is true for the Right.

Thus, at each sequential legislative election, the President’s party has systematically succeeded in achieving an appreciable lead not only nationally, but also across most of the country’s electoral districts, handily carrying most of them in either the first or second round.

The dynamics of this lead can be demonstrated using the equation devised by Taagepera (2007):

$$s_1 = 1 / (MS)^{1/8} = 0.45 \quad (3)$$

where s_1 corresponds to the share of seats that the presidential party could have hoped to win given the district magnitude (M) and the number of districts in the election ($S = 577$ since 1988). As Table 3 shows, the proportion of seats won is significantly higher than the proportion of seats that could be expected in both 1981 and 1988 and from 2002 to 2012.

Table 3: Vote share and seat share of the President’s party in legislative elections since 1981 (France total)

	Legislative elections, Round 1 Vote share	Legislative elections Seat share	Difference in % points
1981: PS and allies	37.4	58.0	20.6
1988: PS and allies	35.9	48.0	12.1
2002: UMP and allies	33.8	63.3	29.5
2007: UMP and allies	41.9	57.1	15.2
2012: PS and allies	36.4	53.5	17.1
2017: LREM and allies	32.3	60.6	28.3
Mean	36.3	56.8	20.5

Source: Laurent de Boissieu, <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives.htm>

2017: The “Honeymoon” Election Model Applied to Emmanuel Macron’s Election

Would the victory of an outsider in the 2017 presidential race call this model into question?

Two factors seemed to coalesce to complicate the task facing the new President, a fact pundits were all too happy to underscore. Some were betting on the resiliency of the two major parties, which have structured French political life for ages, as well as on their ability to immediately bounce back from their defeat in the presidential race, in part due to the “localness” of the legislative elections and the strong foothold of their incumbent candidates. Others, in parallel, pointed to the difficulty that *La République En Marche* (LREM)—founded just one year prior—would face in finding candidates capable of securing a seat in each of the country’s 577 electoral districts. Indeed, only twenty-nine incumbents had chosen to defect to the LREM, and in most districts, the party had selected novice politicians without an ounce of political experience.

But the uncompromising logic of sequential elections ultimately won out (Dolez and Laurent 2017). The political landscape was decimated by the presidential elections, and the shockwave that it generated extended to the ensuing legislative race. The opprobrium cast upon the socialist party in the wake of François Hollande's term and the chaos that reigned among the country's right-wing candidates—now deprived of a clear leader—facilitated the LREM's victory. Turnout plummeted by 29 points compared to the first round of the presidential elections, due in part to very low participation from voters who had backed Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. While candidates for the LREM and its allies earned 1.3 million fewer votes than Emmanuel Macron had just two months earlier, they nevertheless received 32.3% of the votes cast, an 8% gain compared to President Emmanuel Macron's score (24%).

Two new factors even worked in favor of an LREM victory. The first relates to the ban on holding multiple elected offices. Most members of parliament then also serving as mayors opted to retain their mayoral seats. Over 200 representatives (around 40% of incumbents) did not run for reelection, thus offering inroads for candidates from the LREM (Evans and Ivaldi 2017). A second element favored LREM in the second round of voting: its central position on the political spectrum, which allowed it to win in the second round both in face-offs against the Right (273 cases), through support from left-wing voters, and in face-offs against the Left (135 cases), through support from right-wing voters (Dolez and Laurent 2018). As a result, the LREM and its allies succeeded in securing an absolute majority of the seats in the National Assembly.

The electoral outcome in 2017 thus shows that a candidate capable of rallying over half of the vote in the second round of the presidential elections—regardless of the strength of his or her local party's local presence—has the ability to win a legislative majority by taking advantage of the “honeymoon” election surge.

The Outlook for 2022

In light of these factors, all signs point to a scenario in which the next President will again benefit from “honeymoon” elections next June. The last six sequential elections have demonstrated that:

1. Between the presidential and legislative elections, the presidential party gathers substantial momentum—surging by an average of 9 points thanks to the differential abstention of voters supporting the candidates defeated two months prior. The newly elected President's party systematically scores over 30% higher in the first round of the legislative elections, and this number often exceeds 35%.
2. In the second round of voting, votes from supporters of candidates eliminated in the first round and the inherent effects of the two-round system have offered the President's party an absolute legislative majority five out of six times. The share of seats secured by the presidential party in the second round has been far greater than the share of the vote received in the first round. The difference has never been less than 12 points. The average difference has been 20.5 points.

Given this information, the seat share (S_L) obtained by the presidential party depends on the vote share (V_L) it obtains in the first round, itself dependent on the vote share (V_P) received by the future president in the first round of presidential voting. Thus:

$$S_L = f(V_P) \tag{4}$$

Yet this is not enough to produce reliable electoral forecasts.

These will only make sense after the presidential election. However, it is currently possible to imagine three potential scenarios. Emmanuel Macron's reelection seems to be the most likely outcome. This would therefore be his second term. The LREM would, of course, be able to count on the local presence of its incumbent contenders. Above all, the presidential party, which benefited from the collapse of the left in 2017, now stands to benefit from the fragmentation of the Right, caught in a stranglehold between Emmanuel Macron and candidates on the Far Right. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that in 1988, when François Mitterrand was reelected, the socialists were only able to win a plurality in the National Assembly, a far cry from the "Pink Wave" seen in 1981. Likewise, in 2007, the Right had been in power for five years, and, although they were able to hang on to a majority in the wake of Nicolas Sarkozy's election, they ultimately surrendered 45 seats in the National Assembly. If Macron were to be re-elected, it is likely that a similar scenario will play out, and in particular, that LREM candidates in the second round will benefit less from their central position than they did in 2017, whether they are facing the Left, the Right, or the Far Right.

If Valérie Pécresse were elected, however, it would be her first term. She would benefit from the local presence of LR candidates, and would also be the first beneficiary of the reclassification of Emmanuel Macron's voters, whose champion would have been defeated a few weeks. She would certainly secure a large parliamentary majority.

Lastly, there is the possibility that Marine Le Pen or Jean-Luc Mélenchon might also win. For the time being, this seems unlikely, but were it to occur, they would doubtless find securing a legislative majority to be a more complicated endeavor, due both to their respective places on the political spectrum and to the limited local foothold of their parties—and particularly the low number of incumbents already in office. Yet, the shockwave created by the presidential elections should not be underestimated. Who, in January 1981, would have imagined the "Pink Wave" later that year in June? Likewise, who, in January 2017, would have imagined that Emmanuel Macron would win the election and boast the support of 350 representatives just six months later? While the likelihood that we will see new honeymoon elections next June currently seems quite high, the actual extent of future parliamentary majority will be contingent on factors that will only become clear once the presidential election has been decided.

As such, we recommend that legislative election forecasts made after the presidential election account for whether the president is being elected for the first time or the second time (dummy variable) and his or her place on the political spectrum (center or non-center). Leveraging data gathered from each individual electoral district is also a good way to improve the quality of these forecasts. In particular, at the electoral district level, we suggest taking stock of (1) the score of the newly elected president in the first round of presidential elections; and (2) whether or not the incumbent is running for reelection.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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