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The Legislative Elections of June 2012

Under the Fifth Republic, elections to the National Assembly have always ceded primacy, constitutionally and institutionally, to the presidential race. Charles de Gaulle ensured that political parties received little or no mention within the Constitution, to suppress the divisive factionalisation of political representation which had proved so deleterious to the Third and Fourth republics (Wright, 1989: 4). The elections which would empower these parties in identifying the governing coalition fared little better constitutionally, receiving a single line in Article 24 noting that they should be by direct universal suffrage, as compared with the presidential election’s more substantial definition in Article 7.

So much for the founder’s intentions: the three successive post-presidential legislative elections of 2002, 2007 and 2012 in fact represented a return to the secondary role of the legislative function after a period in which the National Assembly elections attained a higher saliency, which enabled them to act as a block to, if not parity with, presidential ambition, resulting in two periods of cohabitation starting in 1993 and 1997. In 1986, when for the first time a government was appointed which did not come from the presidential camp, some commentators doubted the ability of the Republic to survive a bicephalous executive with antagonistic heads. Right-wing domination and Left fragmentation had ensured de Gaulle, Pompidou and Giscard all inherited broadly aligned governments, with legislative elections sorting out some internecine clashes but with no real executive implication.

Two years proved that the imminent collapse some feared was an exaggeration. However, the periods of cohabitation which followed did demonstrate the legislative deadlock to which divisive policies would give rise. As the governmental partners to a right-wing President for the later five-year period of cohabitation between 1997 and 2002, a Socialist
Party with its eye on occupying the Elysée Palace with a supporting majority and coinciding elections for the new presidential *quinquennat* returned the system to the *status quo ante*, where a President governing without a legislative majority was not only constitutionally, but also rationally, unthinkable.

In a system where the election to the Assembly now follows within weeks of a presidential election, the likelihood of an outcome providing anything other than a supportive majority for the elected incumbent is small. The legislative elections can therefore reasonably be described as a plebiscite of endorsement for the President. In short, we no longer look to legislative elections to provide a macro-outcome other than continuity for a successfully returned incumbent, or *alternance* to reflect an opposition presidential victory.

Since 2002, the reduction of the presidential term to five years, with legislative elections immediately coming after the presidentials, has affected both the mechanical and psychological forces that shape responses by parties and voters. The new institutional setting has intensified the effect of the ‘*vote utile*’, or the tendency to avoid wasting votes on minor peripheral parties with little chance of getting seats. The accentuation of this form of strategic voting shapes the party system, increasing its degree of presidentialisation and reducing fractionalisation. Moreover, voting intentions for legislative elections are altered by the perception of what happened in the presidentials to affect the overall political regime, one assumption being that voters would tend to support the newly elected President in the legislative ballot to avoid another period of divided government.

In this chapter, we will first look at the competitive strategies on both the Left and the Right, strongly determined by the outcome of the presidentials. Having then looked at the overall outcome of the two rounds of the legislative race on 10 and 17 June, we will then look to understand what micro-outcomes – constituency-level results – tell us about the context in which these ballots took place, and most importantly what indications of future dynamics in the party system and political competition more generally could be discerned at the close of the fourth ballot in three months.

1. **Competitive strategies in the legislatives**

The dynamics and outcome of the presidential election did not significantly change as they moved to collective rather than personalised competition in the legislatives. Following Hollande's election, a victory