

**Presidential elections and Europe:  
the 2012 game-changer**

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**Abstract**

As well as marking 60 years since the signature of the Treaty of Rome, 2017 will see the 10<sup>th</sup> Presidential election of France's 5th Republic. The overlap between the question of Europe and the election to France's highest office provides the framework for this article to explore the development of the European debate in France.

Prior to 2012, and despite the increasing and undeniable salience of it for French domestic concerns, the question of Europe is widely considered to have been a secondary issue in Presidential elections. Focussing in particular on the period since the pivotal debate and referendum on the Maastricht Treaty and the intervening transition from 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus', this article will explain how and why Europe has seemingly defied logic to remain on the margins of successive election campaigns before presenting the 2012 Presidential elections as a game-changer on how the question of Europe featured. The conclusion offers a discussion on the ramifications for future Presidential elections, starting with that of 2017.

## Introduction

In the 60 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the European project has become a central influence on French politics and society. Despite evidence of consistent general support, there has been increasing scepticism as sacrifices and negative consequences have become inevitable (Milner 2000, 35-58). One would therefore be forgiven for assuming that the intervening period would have witnessed an elevation of the question of Europe to a crucial election issue. However, and as will be discussed in greater detail below, ‘Europe has long been absent from French national electoral contests’ (Dehousse and Tacea 2015, 152). Whilst opposition to Europe has been mounting, the political translation of it has been reserved to marginal and extreme elements. The dominant centre-Right/centre-Left forces have shared a consensus on the fundamental advancement of the EU project (Drake 2013, 127-8). As a result, Europe dominated by a ‘rhetoric of unanimity’ (Rozenberg 2011), has never really been an issue with enough leverage to see it brought in from the margins of successive presidential campaigns. The strange set of circumstances that has seen the increasingly important issue of Europe astutely avoided has enabled analyses of its presence in elections campaigns to be described as ‘*invisible mais omniprésente*’ (Belot and Cautrès 2004, 119-41).

This article begins by shedding some light on how this paradoxical set of circumstances has emerged, with the 1995 Presidential elections as the logical starting point. Up until then, there had been little or no consultation between the political elite and the general population on this question. The belief, commonly described as the ‘permissive consensus’ (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970), was that widespread acceptance of the European project characterised the general view of the French (and general EU) population with much support for the French lead on its development and progression (Schmidt 2007, 999-1001). However, François Mitterrand’s decision to ratify the Maastricht Treaty via a referendum in 1992 cast doubt on this assumption and revealed how the European question was far from consensual (Drake 2008, 197-98; Flood 2005, 43; Hurrelmann 2007, 352). The post-Maastricht era would see the ‘permissive consensus’ replaced by what has been described as a ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2008). Europe, it is argued, has since then featured much more prominently on national political agendas as it has moved away from its status as the preserve of the mainstream elite. Despite this shift, the European question appears to have remained no more than an issue of secondary concern in successive election campaigns to France’s highest office. The three Presidential elections of 1995, 2002 and 2007

will be briefly analysed to demonstrate and explain how this period saw the European issue become an increasingly important, difficult, yet hidden, campaign theme. 2012 is then presented as a game-changing election signalling an important shift in how Europe featured. It will be concluded that Europe is now here to stay as a prominent issue in Presidential election campaigns, reflecting its position as an unavoidable area of importance. The article will draw on material from speeches, manifestos, media appearances and polling data.

### **1995-2007: The European Elephant**

The 1995 elections were not only significant because they would turn the page on the Mitterrand era. They were equally the first post-Maastricht Presidential elections. This was significant for two reasons. Firstly, the successful ratification of the Maastricht treaty and its overwhelming backing by the bulk of France's mainstream politicians marked a significant step forward for the European project. As a result, the presence of Europe was set to weigh more heavily in the lives of the entire French population for years to come (Johnson 1997, 260-1). Secondly, despite OUI victory, the referendum sparked considerable debate in France and exposed clear divisions over the issue amongst the electorate as well as within and between political parties (Rozenberg 2011; Milner 2000, 35-6). One would therefore have been forgiven for assuming that Europe's prominence as an election theme would increase accordingly. However, an examination of the 1995 campaign reveals that this did not materialise, with a 'conspicuous absence of a serious discussion on Europe' (Mazey 1995, 146; Ross 2000, 96-97; Flood 2005, 58) amongst candidates and only secondary importance afforded the issue in opinion polls.<sup>1</sup> This paradoxical set of circumstances can be explained by the fact that the growing doubts and fears, as exposed by the Maastricht referendum debate, coupled with the continued consensus amongst the mainstream political elite over the advancement of the European project (Tiersky 1995, 116-19) meant that the interests of the main candidates were best served by avoiding this difficult issue.

By the time of the 2002 Presidential elections, the progress of the European project had continued unabated, perhaps most symbolically represented with the introduction of the Euro in January of the election year. With such developments came increasing doubts, fears and mounting Euroscepticism (Flood 2005, 42-63). Whilst President Chirac undoubtedly picked up the pro-European baton from his predecessor, there was an evident dampening in enthusiasm emanating from *l'Elysée*, perhaps reflective of the doubts amongst the electorate. This was no more evident than in the changing nature of the Franco-German axis. The *moteur*

*de l'Europe*, as previously represented by the Mitterrand-Kohl partnership, fell on difficult times as Chirac and German Chancellor Gerard Schroeder appeared to have very different priorities (Boussat 2006, 187-212). In such circumstances, once again, one would have assumed that Europe would have an increased bearing in the 2002 Presidential election campaign. However, as had been the case in 1995, both in terms of the attention afforded by the candidates and polling data on important themes, the expected increase in prominence was not forthcoming. The increasing scepticism surrounding the question of Europe was a key factor in explaining why 'avoiding the issue of 'Europe' unsurprisingly emerged in the 2002 elections and an implicit campaign objective of the front-runners.' (Drake 2003, 6). Despite Chirac's failings over Europe, his overall commitment to the project, juxtaposed with increasing doubts, rendered it an obsolete area for gaining political capital for all main candidates, thus explaining why it *assez peu nourri les débats entre candidats tout au long de ce printemps électoral.*' (Belot and Cautrès 2004, 119-41). Such scant coverage unsurprisingly impacted on the importance afforded to the European question by the electorate, as evidenced in polling data where it continued to languish as a question of secondary importance or even as an issue of 'no significance' to voters (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Bélanger 2012, 108-09).<sup>2</sup>

When the 2007 election came around, there was good reason to assume that Europe would feature as a salient campaign theme. Chirac's second term in office would be dominated by international affairs. Initially, his brave stance on the 2003 Iraq conflict earned him plenty of plaudits. However, before too long, he ran into serious difficulties and the issue of Europe was significant (Cole, Le Galès and Levy 2008, 1-16). In particular, his 2005 decision to ratify the new European constitutional treaty via a referendum sparked an intense debate on the question of Europe on a scale not experienced since Maastricht. However, this time the result was inverted and any hope he had harboured of consolidating his popularity through a OUI victory evaporated when the French sensationally voted NON (Dulphy and Manigand 2006, 22-46). This result (compounded by subsequent domestic difficulties) served to accentuate the significance of the 2007 elections as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start afresh. Given that Europe had so clearly defined the preceding period combined with the sheer intensity of debate, doubt and division as exposed by the referendum campaign, it is once again with a certain degree of puzzlement that the theme of Europe seemingly figured so little during the 2007 Presidential campaign. The major candidates persisted with the approach of the two previous elections whereby the negativity (as exposed

by the growing Euroscepticism brought so evidently to light during the referendum debate) saw them divert attention away from the problematic European question, instead choosing to focus heavily on domestic affairs (Cautrès 2007, 3). Once again, such minimal coverage cannot have been without significance on the persistence of Europe as a theme of only secondary importance in polling data.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, the discrepancy between the importance of Europe and its marginalisation in Presidential election campaigns must be understood through the optic of widespread growing disenchantment that had seen the emergence of a growing gulf between political elites and their general populations (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015, 710-11). Such a phenomenon is not exclusive to France, or indeed Europe, and is one that shows no sign of abating. However, this alone is insufficient. Explaining why the anticipated post-92 promotion of Europe as a central election issue did not materialise necessitates a consideration of the impact of the transition from ‘permissive consensus’ to ‘constraining dissensus’. As Hooghe and Marks argue, with increasing public scepticism and deepening divisions within mainstream political parties, the elite was forced to look nervously over their shoulders when dealing with the European question (5). The upshot in Presidential election campaigns was a tendency to avoid any overt discussion of Europe with the obvious impact on how this was translated in the opinion polls.

**Table 4<sup>4</sup>**

	Rank in importance		
	1995	2002	2007
Unemployment	1	1	1
Education	2	7	4
Personal security	8	2	7
Environment	9	6	6
Immigration	11	4	10
<b>Europe</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>

Let us now turn our attention to the 2012 election as a game-changer in terms of how the European question featured.

## **Presidentials 2012 - game changer**

Nicolas Sarkozy was elected in 2007 on a *rupture* ticket, vowing to tackle the difficult reforms he deemed necessary to help France adapt to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy (Hewlett 2007, 407-10). His *hyperpresident* approach to reforms such as the pension regime combined with his inimitable Presidential style soon led to a crisis in terms of his popularity (Cole 2012, 312-14; Gaffney 2012). It was however another crisis that would bring the question of Europe into stark focus. Despite declaring that *la France est de retour en Europe* in his election victory speech, and his leading role in overcoming the 2005 setback with the renegotiated Lisbon Treaty, it was not until the onset of the global financial crisis of 2008 that Europe became the central focus of Sarkozy's presidency. As the crisis gathered momentum and threatened the single currency via the Greece debacle, Sarkozy discovered the merits of the Franco-German axis and led France to centre stage in helping protect Europe's economy from a complete meltdown (Dimitrakopoulos, Menon, Passas 2009, 451-65). By the beginning of 2012, the extent of the financial crisis had become clear and it inevitably dominated political debates and media coverage up and down the country. Such focalisation on the crisis was accentuated further by the President's calculation that his best chance of re-election lay by diverting attention away from his desperately unpopular domestic performance and instead focussing on presenting himself as the man that saved the Euro from collapse. On the one hand he was able to claim that the unprecedented financial meltdown prevented him from achieving all of his goals domestically. On the other he could portray himself as a responsible leader who had been at the forefront of helping France and Europe face up to the crisis and prepare for the worst consequences it had to offer. His strategy was clearly to present himself as the candidate who needed to remain in post in order to see through the long-term plan he was responsible for putting in place.

### *The Campaign – First round*

The campaign for the first round of the 2012 election campaign involved 10 candidates (a drop in comparison to 2002 and 2007), 5 of whom inflected the campaign significantly. Outgoing President Sarkozy's official programme *Mes Propositions pour une France Forte et Juste* was a late arrival, was criticised for being light on detail but certainly afforded considerable prominence to the question of Europe.<sup>5</sup> His campaign tour and public appearances saw him consolidate the main points of his policy on Europe – i.e. that Europe was of considerable importance for France, that the crisis had exposed the need for change

and that he, having played such a central role in rescuing the project, was the best placed candidate to continue the job.<sup>6</sup> A typical example of Sarkozy's discourse on Europe came in his Récy speech of 15 March when he declared:

*Voilà à quoi nous avons consacré les quatre dernières années ! Maintenant que la crise financière est derrière nous, maintenant que nous avons résolu le problème grec – et ce n'est pas si simple – je veux vous le dire ici, en nous battant pour les autres nous nous sommes battus pour la France, en sauvant les autres nous nous sommes sauvés nous-mêmes, et où sont-ils tous ceux qui n'ont cessé de me critiquer lorsqu'avec Madame MERKEL nous nous battions pour sauver l'Euro, pour sauver l'Europe, pour sauver la Grèce ? Aujourd'hui que la crise financière est derrière nous...*<sup>7</sup>

Francois Hollande launched his campaign much earlier and, in his *60 Engagements pour la France*, outlined the importance of the European question.<sup>8</sup> His campaign speeches and appearances saw the PS candidate present himself as the alternative to Sarkozy's austerity-driven response to the crisis. He accepted the need for change but refused to accept the inevitability of the German-led line, insisting instead on the need for growth as the central focus.<sup>9</sup> For example, in his Paris speech of 17 March, Hollande declared:

*Nous sommes à un moment crucial, car l'élection présidentielle en France se tient au moment même où un nouveau traité est signé. Face à un pacte qui porte le nom de stabilité mais qui peut devenir un pacte d'austérité, j'oppose un pacte de responsabilité, de gouvernance et de croissance.*<sup>10</sup>

The Sarkozy/Hollande duel was of course dominant. However, the unlikely clash between Jean-Luc Melenchon and Marine Le Pen provided an interesting battle that was not without significance and the question of Europe figured heavily.

The *Front National* candidate set out her programme in the manifesto entitled *Mon Projet* including the familiar anti-EU rhetoric of her party based around the demand for greater sovereignty via a withdrawal from the Eurozone and a renegotiation of all existing treaties.<sup>11</sup> Such themes punctuated her campaign tour as she insisted on the need to bring Europe into the debate more so as to avoid the usual cosy consensus of the mainstream elite.<sup>12</sup>

*Vous l'avez remarqué en effet, aucun des deux candidats siamois de l'UMP et du PS ne traite la question européenne, alors qu'elle engage très largement la France, les Français et leur avenir. Non, conscients de leur parfaite ressemblance sur le sujet de l'Europe, les siamois de l'UMP et du PS, qui souvenons-nous posaient fièrement ensemble en 2005 pour Paris Match afin d'appeler les Français à dire OUI à la Constitution de Monsieur Giscard, choisissent délibérément pendant cette campagne d'esquiver la question de l'Europe, au profit des coups de communication et des annonces sans lendemain, quand ce ne sont pas les noms d'oiseau ou les insultes !<sup>13</sup>*

Melenchon was equally critical of the European project but for very different reasons. In his *L'Humain d'abord* manifesto, the *Front de Gauche* candidate set out the need for a new direction.<sup>14</sup> Interpreting the post-Lisbon Europe as one firmly set on a neo-liberal trajectory, he called for France to lead a new, post-crisis era for Europe based on social justice, ecology and the need to overcome the existing democratic crisis.<sup>15</sup>

*Il faut avoir la volonté et ne pas se coucher chaque fois que quelqu'un parle un peu fort, ne pas vouloir jouer le bon élève de la classe capitaliste, ne pas céder toutes les cinq minutes à Mme Merkel ou à je-ne-sais-qui quand ils font les gros yeux pour protéger la rente en Europe. [...] Mais en plus nous aurons ouvert la brèche pour toute l'Europe car ce sera la première faille dans le dispositif des libéraux, que nous aurons réussie. Et après nous votent les grecs. Après nous votent les allemands. Et cette brèche s'élargira quand on verra que les français ont commencé à abattre le mur, le mur de l'argent !<sup>16</sup>*

The final candidate of the five front-runners was the centrist Francois Bayrou. This stalwart of recent presidential elections reiterated his well-trodden, pro-European stance and sought to present himself as the consensual candidate in his *La France Solidaire* programme.<sup>17</sup> The manifesto and his campaign outlined his acceptance of how the crisis had exposed the frailties of the European project but that the response lay not in scapegoating Europe and instead in France leading a strengthening of the project, something it had always done and benefitted greatly from.<sup>18</sup>

*Je veux le dire face à tous les Français qui nous regardent et face au monde qui nous regarde, dans cette salle, dans ce grand courant d'opinion, dans ce peuple français qui est en train de se former pour son redressement : nous, l'Europe, nous l'aimons ! Nous aimons l'Europe parce que nous aimons la France et nous aimons l'Europe du*

*même amour que nous aimons la France, parce que c'est la même chose et le même destin. L'Europe est la clef du destin de la France comme la France est la clef du destin de l'Europe. Si l'Europe est faible, si l'Europe est vide, alors l'avenir de la France sera affaibli.*<sup>19</sup>

Overall, the first round campaign demonstrated just how significant the European question had become for the main candidates. Its prominence in manifestos, campaign literature and candidate speeches revealed, both directly and indirectly, how Europe had become an unavoidable issue for any serious contenders (Drake 2013, 124-41). It is interesting to consider, via a range of opinion polls, just what impact this had on the electorate.

An early *Opinionway* poll on 14-15 March 2012 asked respondents to outline the themes that would have the greatest influence on their choices in the first round.<sup>20</sup> Only 8% picked out *la Construction Européenne* with issues such as *Le pouvoir d'achat* (43%), *l'emploi* (42%) or *l'immigration* (21%) ranking higher. A similar question could be found in an IPSOS poll of 19-21 April, on the eve of the vote, where respondents were asked to identify the three dominant themes that would influence their decision.<sup>21</sup> Europe did not even figure with similar domestic concerns taking priority. A CSA study conducted on polling day 22 April included a similar question with results showing how 12% chose the future of the Euro to be a significant concern; again, hardly a top priority.<sup>22</sup> A TNS SOFRES poll on the same day revealed no specific place for the question of Europe with 9% highlighting the international situation as important.<sup>23</sup> One poll that bucked the evident trend was a Harris Interactive study of 22 April where Europe figured much more prominently drawing 20% but still lagging behind the usual domestic concerns such as *la dette*, *l'éducation* or *les impôts*.<sup>24</sup>

Table 5<sup>25</sup>

Opinionway		IPSOS		CSA		TNS SOFRES		Harris Interactive	
Le pouvoir d'achat	43	Le pouvoir d'achat	46	Le pouvoir d'achat	45	La lutte contre le chômage	50	L'emploi	44
L'emploi	42	La crise économique et financière	44	L'emploi	38	La réduction de la dette et des déficits	31	La lutte contre les déficits, la dette	38
La protection sociale	38	Le chômage	30	La dette de l'Etat	30	L'amélioration de l'école et l'enseignement	29	Le pouvoir d'achat	36
La dette et les déficits	30	Les inégalités sociales	25	Les inégalités sociales	29	L'amélioration du pouvoir d'achat	26	L'éducation et la formation	32
Les inégalités sociales	25	L'immigration	24	L'immigration	20	Le financement du système de protection sociale	24	La lutte contre les inégalités	30
L'éducation et la formation	21	Les déficits publics	20	Les retraites	19	La lutte contre les inégalités et les injustices	23	Les impôts, la fiscalité	26
L'immigration	21	L'insécurité	19	La sécurité des biens et des personnes	17	la lutte contre la pauvreté	18	La moralisation de la vie politique	25
La sécurité	17	Les retraites	19	L'éducation et la recherche	13	La lutte contre l'insécurité	16	L'immigration	24
La fiscalité	16	Les impôts et les taxes	17	<b>L'avenir de l'euro</b>	<b>12</b>	La politique fiscale, les impôts et les taxes	15	Les retraites	21
L'environnement	9	Le fonctionnement du système de santé	17	L'accès aux soins	10	La lutte contre l'immigration clandestine	15	La santé	21
<b>La construction européenne</b>	<b>8</b>	Le système éducatif	15	La protection de l'environnement	5	La protection de l'environnement	9	<b>L'Europe</b>	<b>20</b>
La France dans le monde	7	L'environnement	6	L'accès au logement	5	<b>La situation internationale</b>	<b>9</b>	La compétitivité des entreprises françaises	19
La corruption, les affaires	6	Le fonctionnement de la justice	6	Le nucléaire	2	L'intégration des minorités dans la société française	3	La sécurité des personnes et des biens	18
La mondialisation	3	L'accès au logement	4	Rien de tout cela	7			La lutte contre les délocalisations	16
NSP/NR	0	Les inégalités entre femmes et hommes	3					La réforme des institutions	14
		L'avenir de l'énergie nucléaire	3					La politique étrangère de la France	13

Despite a certain degree of variation between the poll outcomes, there is a clear trend suggesting that, whilst Europe was certainly something that had some bearing on voter choices, the prominence afforded to this question by candidates was not replicated amongst the electorate. The first round result contained no real surprises with Sarkozy (27.8%) and Hollande (28.63%) progressing to the second round head-to-head (Kuhn 2013).

### *The Campaign – Second round*

Neither candidate wasted any time getting back on the campaign trail following the first round result. On 23 April Hollande was in Brittany and Sarkozy in St. Cyr-Loire. Early evidence of the continued prominence of Europe was delivered by the PS candidate in his Quimper speech when he declared that he wanted to make *l'élection présidentielle du 6 mai non pas une élection nationale mais une élection européenne*.<sup>26</sup> He argued that this election provided the opportunity for France to set an example for other EU nations where there was an equal thirst for a new direction. Sarkozy countered with his insistence on the continuation of his successful approach. The impact of the strong first round FN vote was clear to see in the outgoing President's tough rhetoric recognising that Europe was increasingly perceived as connected to difficulties over the economy and immigration. For example:

*Je veux m'adresser à ceux dont on méprise la douleur, à tous ceux auxquels on ne donne jamais la parole, parce que, au fond, on ne veut pas entendre leurs plaintes. A tous ceux qui ne supportent plus le déni de souffrance dont ils se sentent victimes, à tous ceux qui en ont assez d'entendre que l'insécurité n'est pas une réalité, que l'immigration, ce n'est pas un sujet. Le nombre d'insultes, d'injures que j'ai dû supporter parce que j'ai osé poser la question de l'immigration, c'est un scandale !<sup>27</sup>*

Despite calls for more than the one televised debate scheduled for 2 May, the only other time the two candidates would share a television platform was for a special edition of *Des paroles et des actes* on 26 April.<sup>28</sup> However, instead of a conventional head-to-head debate, both appeared separately for a strictly-regulated 35 minutes each. A wide range of issues were covered, including Europe. Hollande called into question the liberal, deregulationist approach of the EU and was highly critical of the “Merkozy”-led austerity response to the crisis. Sarkozy also focussed heavily on Europe and countered Hollande's negative assessment of his European policy claiming that his record and approach was and

would continue to be successful. Only through a continuation of his line, he argued, would France truly experience the growth his competitor was so keen on.

Beyond the polemical debate around the ownership of 1 May, *la fête du travail* provided a high profile opportunity for both candidates (and Marine le Pen) to address the nation (Leveque 2012). Hollande attended a meeting in Nevers to mark this important date and commemorate the passing of Pierre Bérégovoy. He made much of the past, including that of the former Prime Minister and Francois Mitterrand, and in particular the long-held pro-Europeanism of his party:

*Je suis européen. François Mitterrand nous a montré la voie. Pierre Bérégovoy a éclairé le passage. Je suis européen parce que je pense que dans un contexte comme nous le connaissons, la crise qui frappe, notre Europe peut être le levier, la solution — sauf si elle se condamne à l'austérité, ce que le candidat sortant a choisi comme orientation avec la chancelière d'Allemagne.*<sup>29</sup>

He hammered home the point that his victory would provide a much sought example for other EU nations seeking an alternative to austerity. Sarkozy held a huge rally at the Trocadero in Paris where, whilst re-affirming his pro-European credentials, he highlighted the increasing fears attached to the project and in particular the perceived detrimental impact on French workers. The solution he argued lay with the borders – Europe's external borders as well as those within:

*Il faut des frontières à l'Europe. Il faut des frontières à la France. Non pour s'enfermer, mais pour s'affirmer dans le monde. Pour clarifier les rapports avec les autres. La frontière, c'est le droit opposé à la force. C'est la règle opposée au désordre. C'est la régulation au lieu du laisser-faire. Les frontières, cela peut paraître loin des préoccupations quotidiennes de ceux qui se lèvent tôt et qui travaillent dur.*<sup>30</sup>

The now traditional, and arguably pivotal, TV debate between the candidates took place on 2 May and, unsurprisingly, the marathon 3-hour session saw a broad range of issues discussed.<sup>31</sup> There was no direct discussion of the European question. However, its importance in transcending a number of issues was evident throughout. Whilst the pro-European stance of both candidates may help explain why it did not feature more specifically, that is not say there were no differences on the subject. Inevitably, the crisis brought the discussion on Europe to the table. The now familiar pattern of Sarkozy defending his

approach thus far and the need for it to continue countered by Hollande arguing that the time had come for a new European direction was in evidence.

Both candidates brought their campaigns to a close on 3 May with speeches in Toulon (Sarkozy) and Toulon (Hollande). Unsurprisingly, the familiar lines on Europe were maintained and remained prominent in both camps. The outgoing President sought to remind the electorate of his central role in steering France and Europe through the crisis.

*La France n'a pas été emportée comme tant d'autres pays comme un fétu de paille par la crise. Nous avons tenu. Nous avons pris les mesures, les mesures qui s'imposaient face à l'urgence [...] les réformes qui nous ont évité de connaître l'humiliation que connaît aujourd'hui la Grèce, les souffrances que connaît l'Italie et le Portugal et aujourd'hui les affres que connaît l'Espagne.*<sup>32</sup>

He argued that changing the President would lead to an absurd, new direction and inevitable disaster: *Deux jours de mensonges, et des années pour régler la facture, voilà le projet socialiste.* The PS candidate consolidated his discourse on how he had given some credibility to the idea of an alternative approach for Europe. He argued that something considered impossible was now perfectly possible and even desirable. His victory, he argued, would be a victory not just for France but also for Europe.

*Le devoir qui est le nôtre, la responsabilité qui est la mienne, c'est que la victoire du 6 mai soit ressentie partout en Europe comme un moment d'espoir, comme un moment de confiance, de redressement possible. Je reçois des messages de la Grèce, du Portugal, de l'Espagne de l'Italie, partout où ils nous disent : « Surtout ne laissez pas passer votre chance, vous, peuple français, permettez l'alternance pas simplement en France mais dans toute l'Europe ! ». Nous avons un devoir de victoire.*<sup>33</sup>

The first round trend that saw candidates afford significant importance to the European question clearly continued into round two. To establish whether or not this was replicated amongst the electorate one can turn to a range of opinion poll results. Two word clouds were produced on the results of the following question posed in a 6 May *Harris Interactive Poll: Quelles sont toutes les raisons pour lesquelles vous avez voté pour Nicolas Sarkozy/François Hollande?*<sup>34</sup>



behind the same domestic issues given priority in round one. A *TNS Sofres* poll on the same day presented results to a very similar question where Europe was not even mentioned and *la Situation Internationale* received on 10%.<sup>36</sup> Such an absence for Europe was identifiable in an IPSOS rolling poll in the period leading up to the second round vote.<sup>37</sup> Respondents were asked to identify 3 areas that concerned them most from a personal perspective and also for France more generally. Neither set of results received any explicit reference to Europe .

<b>Opinionway</b>		<b>TNS Sofres</b>		<b>IPSOS (pour la France)</b>		<b>IPSOS (personnellement)</b>	
L'emploi	50	La lutte contre le chômage	49	La crise économique financière	56	Le pouvoir d'achat	61
Le pouvoir d'achat	48	La réduction de la dette et des déficits	36	Le chômage	47	Les retraites	35
La dette et les déficits	47	L'amélioration de l'école et l'enseignement	32	Les déficits publics	36	Les impôts et les taxes	31
La protection sociale	46	L'amélioration du pouvoir d'achat	29	Le pouvoir d'achat	29	Le fonctionnement du système de santé	23
Les inégalités sociales	35	Le financement du système de protection sociale (retraites, santé...)	28	L'immigration	24	La crise économique financière	23
L'éducation et la formation	34	La lutte contre les inégalités et les injustices	23	Les inégalités sociales	17	Le chômage	21
L'immigration	34	La lutte contre la pauvreté	18	Le système éducatif	15	Le système éducatif	16
Le rôle de la France dans le monde	27	La lutte contre l'immigration clandestine	17	L'insécurité	15	L'insécurité	16
La sécurité	25	La lutte contre l'insécurité	15	Le fonctionnement du système de santé	13	Les inégalités sociales	14
La fiscalité	24	La politique fiscale, les impôts et les taxes	15	Les impôts et les taxes	12	L'immigration	13
<b>La construction européenne</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>La situation internationale</b>	<b>10</b>	Les retraites	10	Les déficits publics	9
La corruption, les affaires	20	La protection de l'environnement	7	Le fonctionnement de la justice	6	L'environnement	8
L'environnement	13	L'intégration des minorités dans la société française	6	L'accès au logement	5	L'accès au logement	7
La mondialisation	9	Sans réponse	1	L'environnement	4	Le fonctionnement de la justice	5
Aucun de ceux la	5			L'avenir de l'énergie nucléaire	3	Les inégalités entre femmes et hommes	3

On the surface it would appear that Europe was not of any serious concern to the French electorate in 2012. There certainly appears to have been a significant gap between the electorate and the main candidates in relation to the question of Europe and its importance. This ambiguity helps explain Drake's analysis of the European issue being 'everywhere and nowhere' during the campaign (Drake 2013). The following section provides an explanation for this paradoxical set of circumstances and explains why 2012 should nevertheless be considered a game-changer in relation to this question.

### **Making sense**

The first point to make relates to the fact that in all Presidential elections prior to, and including, 2012, polling data has revealed Europe to be little more than a secondary consideration for the electorate. It is undeniable that Europe has consistently featured well down the list of declared priorities. However, one must be careful not to draw over-simplistic conclusions. Whilst it may well be the case that Europe has not featured in explicit terms, it is impossible to dissociate those themes that have been most prominent from the question of Europe. As the years have passed and the European project has progressed, it has become an undeniably prominent feature in the way in which France functions (Schmidt 2007, 995-98). However, Europe is not something that exists outside France, it is stitched into the very fabric of how it works and importantly how France views itself. This relationship with Europe as somewhat of a *fait accompli* has been reinforced by the dominant political discourse which can be traced back as far as Francois Mitterrand's 1983 *volte-face*. When he then declared in 1987 that *la France est notre patrie et l'Europe notre avenir*, France signalled its choice to henceforth follow a very strong pro-European trajectory and from that point on everyone seemingly bought into the project (Boussat 182). So central has Europe become since then that it could be argued as more of a domestic than a foreign policy issue (Rowdybush and Chamorel 2011, 170). The fact that it is viewed in this manner goes some way towards explaining how and why it has never really featured explicitly as a separate issue of importance for the electorate, as borne out by the polling data. The counter-intuitive consequence that has seen the increased salience of Europe find no replication in its perceived prominence as a principle concern for the electorate (Dehousse and Tacea, 152) can in part be explained by the fact that its significance has been hidden by the conflation between Europe and key domestic issues such as unemployment, economy, immigration, etc.

As demonstrated above, 2012 did not reveal any significant shift in polling data, with Europe continuing in its position of secondary importance. Nothing then, it could be argued, sets 2012 apart. For the voting public, Europe remained ‘the elephant in the room’. The real and significant change concerns the manner with which this issue was handled by the Presidential candidates.

Prior to 2012, the question of Europe was not one that featured prominently in the campaigns of major candidates. 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. Instead, and central to maintaining the ‘elephant in the room’ status, the ‘constraining dissensus’ era saw mainstream parties continue to ‘resist politicising the issue’ (Hooghe and Marks, 21). This is where 2012 becomes the game-changer. If the previous three elections saw Europe dodged or avoided, it is impossible to draw the same conclusion in 2012. In fact, as argued by Dehousse and Tacea, it would be reasonable to discuss the 2012 presidential campaign as having been ‘Europeanised’ with this issue a consistently important theme right across the political spectrum (2015, 155).

Central to understanding the reasons behind this shift is the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008. However, it is first of all important to map out the context within which this crisis struck as it is one where Europe had already started to emerge as a prominent concern. Upon his election in 2007, Sarkozy was unambiguous in outlining his determination to make Europe a priority. In a bid to overcome what he perceived as the setbacks of the Chirac era, he set out to re-establish France’s place as a leader of the European project. This Europeanisation of the French presidency was in full evidence in Sarkozy’s central role in the process leading to the Lisbon treaty which essentially sought to make up for the damage caused by the French 2005 NON vote (Dehousse and Menon 2009, 100-101). Sarkozy’s prioritisation of Europe therefore pre-dated the onset of the financial crisis but it was unquestionably accentuated as a result. When the subprime crisis hit the world economy in 2007-2008, the impact on France was, to a certain extent, underestimated. In the early stages, there was even some suggestion that the structure of the French economy (previously lamented by Sarkozy) could somehow shelter France from the worst of what was to come (de la Brosse 2009). However, as the full impact unfolded, it became clear that France would not be spared and the 2008-12 period was one that saw the crisis inevitably dominate public and political debates (Hewlett 2012). The multiple and interconnected

consequences of the exceptional context lie at the heart of explaining why the 2012 Presidential elections can be described as a game-changer for the European question.

Firstly, it would be no longer possible for Europe to be the ‘elephant in the room’ issue. How could a Presidential campaign in 2012 hope to relegate Europe to a secondary issue when the economic crisis had effectively monopolised political and media debates and thus brought the question of Europe to everyone’s attention? (Lequesne 2012; Dehousse and Tacea 2013, 6). Secondly, Sarkozy’s response to focus all of his attentions on helping save the Euro alongside Angela Merkel in the latter stages of his mandate meant that one of the principal candidates had effectively put all his eggs in the European basket and was intent in making as much political capital from the issue as possible. Thirdly, the long-held, mainstream discourse that Europe was a positive for France – under pressure for some time (Kramer 2006, 126-38; Rozenberg 2011, Rozenberg 2015) – became an extremely difficult line to toe in the wake of the financial crisis. As the Euro emerged as the greatest victim of the depression, the feeling spread that France was being further dragged into the mire as a result. This was pounced upon by eurosceptics and in particular the FN who sought to exploit the crisis and place it front and centre in their own campaign.<sup>39</sup> The central argument that Europe could be a shield to protect France from the vicissitudes of globalisation became a very difficult one to support when this US-born crisis stood to cripple the French economy (for some) because of French membership of the EU.<sup>40</sup> The context of the crisis therefore forced the ‘constraining dissensus’ onto the Presidential election agenda. As a result, the debate over Europe was no longer the preserve of extreme, populist parties on the Left and Right and mainstream candidates were left with little choice but to engage with Europe as a central issue. The fourth and final point relates to the subsequent breakdown in the ‘rhetoric of unanimity’. The hitherto dominant consensus between the mainstream candidates over the advancement and direction of the European project that had been so central during the eras of the ‘permissive consensus’ and ‘constraining dissensus’ also broke down as a result of the crisis. The two main candidates, whilst both adamant pro-Europeans, argued for two very different responses to the crisis. On the one hand, Sarkozy insisted on the continuity of his austerity-driven programme whereas Hollande called for a new anti-austerity direction focused on growth. Such differentiation meant that for the first time there was some political capital to be gained in both camps in making more of Europe as a key election theme.

Prior to 2012, the evasive approach of Presidential candidates that had seen Europe pushed to the margins of campaign debates reflected the ‘silent Europeanisation’ experienced

in France in spite of mounting fears, doubts and opposition (Rozenberg 2011(b), 11). However, in the run-up to the 2012 campaign, a number of factors converged to ensure that any hope of Europe continuing as an unspoken issue would be impossible. The build-up in tension finally broke through as a result of the convergence between Sarkozy's Europeanised Presidency and the onset of the financial crisis. The subsequent prioritisation of Europe and its now flagrant and undeniable importance to, and influence on, domestic, French issues meant that it was no longer possible for it to be relegated to an issue of secondary importance.

## **Conclusion**

The shift in election campaign coverage afforded to the issue of Europe in 2012 is important in signalling an irreversible change in how it will feature in future Presidential elections, starting in 2017. With Europe now placed as a central concern for candidates, the proverbial cat has been let out of the bag and it is difficult to see how this can be undone. Furthermore, it was argued earlier that a number of convergent factors came together to essentially force candidates to move away from the evasive treatment of the European question that hitherto had been so dominant. Central to such concerns were the shifting contextual circumstances of the financial crisis that made it virtually impossible to push any consideration of Europe's influence or importance to the margins of the campaign debate. Given the events of the 2012-17 period – the migrant crisis, the threat of terrorism, ongoing economic difficulties, the Brexit controversy, Hollande's failure to deliver on his anti-austerity rhetoric and the growing support for the FN and its Eurosceptic stance –, it is obvious that Europe will remain an area of unavoidable and principal concern for all candidates in the 2017 Presidential elections. One only has to consider the attention afforded to the European question in the all-important primaries on the Left and the Right as an early indicator of just how significant Europe has become and will continue to be.<sup>41</sup> The increased salience as dictated by recent contextual developments will not be without consequence on the priorities of the electorate. Whilst it is unlikely to bypass the traditional dominant concerns (unemployment, spending power and immigration), there is a distinct possibility that Europe as an explicit (as well as implicit) theme of concern will feature much more prominently in the list of priorities determining voters' choices in 2017. This will undoubtedly force candidates to afford Europe even more attention. Such a symbiotic process will see Europe progressively become increasingly

important as an electoral issue rendering its days as the ‘elephant in the room’ very much a thing of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf for example Ipsos, Sondage sortie des urnes, 23 April 1995 - <http://www.ipsos.fr/ipsos-public-affairs/sondages/sondage-sortie-urnes-1>; Ipsos, Sondage, sortie des urnes, 7 May 1995 - <http://www.ipsos.fr/sondages/sortie-urnes>.

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos, 1er Tour Présidentielle 2002, 21 April 2002 - <http://www.ipsos.fr/sondages/1er-tour-presidentielle-2002comprendre-vote-francais-qui-vote-quoi-mot>; Ipsos, Second Tour Présidentielle 2002, 5 May 2002 - <http://www.ipsos.fr/sondages/second-tour-presidentielle-2002-comprendre-vote-francais>.

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos, 1er Tour Présidentielle 2007. 22 April 2007 - <http://www.ipsos.fr/presidentielle-2007/pdf/ssu.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Table adapted from CEVIPOF data ranking the importance of issues in Presidential election campaigns (Lewis-Beck 2012, 92).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.agitateur.org/IMG/pdf/Sarkozy2012.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Cf for example campaign speeches in Annecy, 16 February, 2012; Marseilles, 19 February 2012; Lille, 23 February 2012; Villepinte, 11 March 2012; Récy, 15 March 2012; Rueil-Malmaison, 24 March, 2012. The following website is a useful resource for tracking down transcripts of such speeches - <http://www.vie-publique.fr/>

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Récy, 15 March 2012.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ps29.org/IMG/pdf/Projet\\_FH2012.pdf](http://www.ps29.org/IMG/pdf/Projet_FH2012.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Cf for example campaign speeches in Toulon, 24 January 2012; Le Bourget, 22 January 2012; Le Mans, 23 February 2012; Lyon, 1 March 2012.; Valence, 13 March 2012; Marseille, 14 March 2012; Paris, 17 March 2012. The following website is a useful resource for tracking down transcripts of such speeches - <http://www.vie-publique.fr/>. See also - <http://www.les-crisis.fr/documents/2012/discours-de-campagne-hollande-2012.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Francois Hollande, Paris, 17 March 2012.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.frontnational.com/pdf/projet\\_mlp2012.pdf](http://www.frontnational.com/pdf/projet_mlp2012.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Cf for example campaign speeches in Rouen, 15 January 2012; Toulouse, 5 February 2012; Châteauroux, 26 February 2012; Marseille, 4 March 2012; Paris, 8 March 2012; Toulouse-Blagnac, 12 March 2012. The following website is a useful resource for tracking down transcripts of such speeches - <http://www.vie-publique.fr/>

<sup>13</sup> Marine Le Pen, Paris, 8 March 2012.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/brochures/humain\\_dabord.pdf](http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/brochures/humain_dabord.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Cf for example campaign speeches in Paris, 4 January 2012; Besancon, 24 January 2012; Lille, 27 March 2012; Toulouse, 5 April 2012; Paris, 22 April 2012. The following website is a useful resource for tracking

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down transcripts of such speeches - <http://www.vie-publique.fr/>. Alternatively see <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/videotheque/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Melenchon, Paris, 18 March 2012.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.mouvementdemocrate.fr/media/PDF/lafrancesolidaire.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Cf for example campaign speeches in Dunkerque, 19 January 2012; Strasbourg, 6 March, 2012; Perpignan, 29 March 2012; Rennes, 10 April, 2012; Tours, 13 April 2012; Lyon, 16 April 2012. The following website is a useful resource for tracking down transcripts of such speeches - <http://www.vie-publique.fr/>.

<sup>19</sup> Francois Bayrou, 6 March 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Opinionway, le baromètre de la présidentielle 2012, 14-15 March 2012 - [http://www.opinion-way.com/pdf/opinionway-fiducial\\_pour\\_le\\_figaro\\_et\\_lci\\_le\\_barometre\\_de\\_la\\_presidentielle\\_2012\\_-\\_v5.pdf](http://www.opinion-way.com/pdf/opinionway-fiducial_pour_le_figaro_et_lci_le_barometre_de_la_presidentielle_2012_-_v5.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Ipsos, 1er tour présidentielle 2012. Comprendre le vote des Français, 19-21 April 2012 -

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<sup>22</sup> CSA, Election présidentielle 2012. Sondage jour du vote premier tour, 22 April 2012 -

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<sup>23</sup> TNS Sofres, Le premier tour de l'élection présidentielle 2012. Sondage jour du vote, 22 April 2012 -

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<sup>24</sup> Harris interactive, Sondage jour du vote : Motivations de vote et d'abstention au premier tour de l'élection présidentielle de 2012 - [http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2015/09/Results\\_HIFR\\_Jourduvote\\_22042012.pdf](http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2015/09/Results_HIFR_Jourduvote_22042012.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Table 5 brings together the results of the 5 opinion polls referred to above and draws on the questions asking respondents to highlight the themes most important in determining their choices.

<sup>26</sup> François Hollande, Quimper, 23 April 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire, 23 April 2012.

<sup>28</sup> *Des Paroles et des Actes*, France 2, 26 April 2012.

<sup>29</sup> François Hollande. Nevers, 1 May 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Paris, 1 May 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Débat Présidentielle, TFI/ France 2, 2 May 2012 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fhv1VVCrRjY>.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Toulon, 3 May 2012.

<sup>33</sup> François Hollande, Toulouse, 3 May 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Harris interactive, Sondage Jour du vote: Motivations de vote et d'abstention au second tour de l'élection présidentielle de 2012, 6 May 2012 - [http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2015/09/Results\\_HIFR\\_Jourduvote\\_06052012.pdf](http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2015/09/Results_HIFR_Jourduvote_06052012.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Opinonway, Sondage jour du vote 2<sup>nd</sup> tour de l'élection présidentielle du 6 mai 2012, 6 May 2012 -

[http://opinionlab.opinion-way.com/dokumenty/Sondage\\_jour\\_du\\_vote\\_2nd\\_tour\\_de\\_l%C3%A9lection%20pr%C3%A9sidentielle\\_du\\_6\\_mai\\_2012\\_13.pdf](http://opinionlab.opinion-way.com/dokumenty/Sondage_jour_du_vote_2nd_tour_de_l%C3%A9lection%20pr%C3%A9sidentielle_du_6_mai_2012_13.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> TNS Sofres, Le second tour de l'élection présidentielle 2012. Sondage Jour du Vote, 6 May 2012 -

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<sup>37</sup> Ipsos, Présidoscope, Vague 10, 27-30 April 2012 -

[https://issuu.com/cheurfa/docs/rapport\\_presidoscopie\\_vague10/2?e=2141223/5343041](https://issuu.com/cheurfa/docs/rapport_presidoscopie_vague10/2?e=2141223/5343041).

<sup>38</sup> Table 6 brings together the results of the 3 opinion polls referred to above and draws on the questions asking respondents to highlight the themes most important in determining their choices.

<sup>39</sup> Cf for example the FN reaction to the crisis - <http://www.frontnational.com/dossier-special-crise-monnaire/>.

<sup>40</sup> Cf for example Jean-Luc Melenchon's April 2012 declaration - <http://www.humanite.fr/politique/avec-le-front-de-gauche-une-autre-europe-une-autre-mondialisation-494330>.

<sup>41</sup> Cf for example: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/citations/2016/06/27/25002-20160627ARTFIG00108-projet-europeen-les-candidats-a-la-primaire-de-la-droite-tentent-de-se-demarquer.php>;

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