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Turning Point or Media Fantasy? An Analysis of the 2017 French Presidential Election

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Turning Point or Media Fantasy? An Analysis of the 2017 French Presidential Election

By Lucia Posteraro

This article explores France's political demographics around the time of the 2017 Presidential election. Through an analysis of political approval ratings and polling this article makes the argument that the supposed realignment in French politics is greatly exaggerated and that traditional political allegiances remain strong.

Introduction

In 2017 France witnessed a shock in its party system. New actors have taken the spotlight in the presidential election from the bipolarism of the PS and the Républicains. The election had already attracted great international awareness for several reasons, the main one being the power transition in a founding member of the European Union at a time of increasing Euroscepticism. Would France lose its recent socialist turn to the far-right's electoral gains in the Northern regions? Would the scandals sparked by historic party representatives trigger a populist response? How would the outcome of such choice shape the economic and ideological direction of the EU, already weakened by Angela Merkel's losses? Would there be alternative candidates to rely on for the future years? Although John Oliver's parodic take on the issue may laugh at these questions, the underlying intricacy of political dilemmas shows how France's condition reflects the state of the Union as much as its domestic ambitions.

In the end, traditional parties have been overtaken by the far-right Front National – led by Marine Le Pen, daughter of the founder Jean-Marie - and La République En Marche - headed by Emmanuel Macron, former government advisor and Minister of the Economy. In the second round, the latter won the race with 66.1% of votes, that is 43.6% of the total population formally registered for voting. The result was followed a few weeks later by LREM's victory of 303 seats in the Assemblée Nationale during the parliamentary elections[1]. The two candidates' performance can only be defined as unordinary for a country historically loyal to its main electoral players.

On one hand, Macron's success came as a surprise, since he had not had the long bureaucratic ascent common among presidential candidates in France. Therefore, his role in François Hollande's government did not pose a direct threat to his predecessor. It was in April 2016, when the Valls cabinet rejected an extensive economic reform, that Macron pushed for the establishment of a new personalised movement in his hometown Amiens[2]: initially described as a party "neither on the right nor on the left", it was soon redefined as "both on the right and on the left"[3], putting Macron on an alleged centrist position vis-à-

Lucia Posteraro is a third year Politics undergraduate at the University of Glasgow. She is currently focusing on political communication, particularly on the way communication strategies at the government level affect protest politics in France. During her exchange at Sciences Po Paris, she has also investigated security dimensions in the field of peacekeeping and EU defence alike, on which she aims to work for the purpose of a master's degree.

[1] Ignazi, 2017, p.195
[2] Le Monde, 2016
[3] Europe 1, 2016

vis the turmoil in other parties. This flexible third way is frequently credited by the press as the reason for his final victory, surpassing the cleavage between left and right and bringing about an "open society" attitude in an otherwise polarised scenario.[4]

On the other hand, the FN has obtained a surprising victory over the centre-right, even though their limited share of parliamentary seats and their loss in the second round may suggest otherwise. In fact, Le Pen still managed to carry her party to the final stage and pose a challenge to more established political forces, which had to concede victory to a relative newcomer. She also seems to have brought in a considerable share of the working class's vote, with 43% of the category expressing an intention to vote for the party at the second round[5]. It is generally assumed in the media that Le Pen's self-determination as a "*fille du peuple*" during the campaign has brought her closer to the idea of defending the weak and the poor ostracised by the laissez-faire economic system, a concept which was traditionally engrained in the left-wing conscience. As a result, some analysts like Pascal Perrineau[6] see this as the birth of a group of "*gaucho-lepénistes*" who realign with the FN. Consequently, Le Pen would have achieved her objective of an alliance between "*le monde de la boutique*" and "*le monde de l'atelier*", relying on both left- and right- wing voters.[7]

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[4] Strudel, 2017, pp.205-207

[5] Fourquet, 2017

[6] Perrineau, 2017, pp.90-93

[7] Ibid., p.94

Both claims imply that voters have suddenly transformed their value set and realigned themselves in spite of the left-right cleavage that has so far characterised France. In other words, we can ask ourselves whether the media assessment accurately reflects an earth-shaking change in the electorate's sociology. Therefore, this essay evaluates the following two hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1: Support for Macron is both a definite and definitive realignment towards the centre and his voters purposely reject the left-right definition.

> Hypothesis 2: The Front National's far-right beliefs have captured the working class's orientations and erased the left-wing ideology of the latter.

Both statements are found to be false, as they assume that a political mindset can be permanently revolutionised by contingent circumstances, despite the long socialisation process from which it originates. The temporary attachment to a party does not reject the ideological and structural framework that has shaped the psychology of a certain voter: our argument is that both LREM and FN have been chosen as a second-hand option after the failure of the main parties' candidates in the run-up. Since no candidate obtained an adequate majority to prevent the move onto the second round, voters have modified their preferences reluctantly, as the second-round party agendas did not match the original values orientations. This is shown in data drawn from the CEVIPOF's Enquête Electorale, the Terra Nova Report on La République En Marche, the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique, Ipsos Mori's surveys, and Nonna Mayer's

qualitative analysis of the FN electorate. All of them provide evidence for the validity of the Michigan model and its long-term socialisation perspective, hence undermining the idea of disappearing cleavages in France. Therefore, the latest election seems to be one of deviation, not of permanent dealignment (in Macron's case) or realignment (in Le Pen's case).

Theory

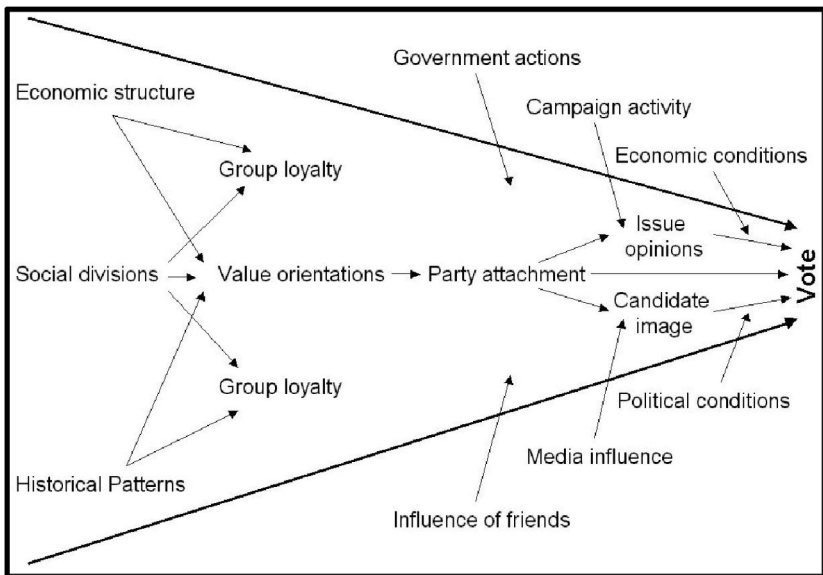*Figure 1 Funnel of Causality. Taken from Dalton, R., Citizen Politics, 7th Edition. SAGE: 2014, p.187.*

Following Eisenhower's landslide victory, Campbell *et al.*'s *The American Voter* proposed the Michigan model of voter choice, based on a socio-psychological interpretation of national survey samples. It aimed to explain the coexistence of partisan stability and strong deviations from it, contrary to Lipset and Rokkan's

"freezing hypothesis".[8] In fact, the Michigan group saw political orientations as stable throughout time and only subject to short-term fluctuations in the political offer, which could alter voting decisions without necessarily compromising longstanding adherence to values[9]. The way this process is presented takes the name of "funnel of causality", stressing causal and temporal links between factors towards the final vote.

Initially, socio-economic conditions trigger conflicts of interest among the groups present in a scenario: they include historical patterns like regional alignments, social divisions, and the economic structure. In turn, this brings about an individual's group identity and values orientations, which can be exogenously shaped by government actions and friends' influence, until the person develops attachment to a party as a tool for understanding and simplifying choices. This latest factor shapes issue opinions and the perception of candidates' image, with contributions from broader conditions, campaigns, and the media. The socialisation process begins during upbringing when the family's cues enduringly define the elector's identification, and ends in the final vote.[10]

From this perspective, the lack of political knowledge among most voters is nevertheless translated into electoral outcomes through this perception filter. The reason for believing that such a US-centred model may be translated into the French system is twofold. Firstly, the French and the American political

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[8] Lipset, S., Rokkan, S., 1967
[9] Bartels, 2010, pp. 242-244; Inglehart, Welzel, 2005, pp.98-106
[10] Dalton, 2014, pp.183-194

system share conditions for such a socialisation process to be defined. Those include: a strong centre-periphery and social group cleavage; an intense personalisation of the executive; relevant exposition to political information through mass media (in particular the role of television debates); and a relatively stable party attachment which electoral sociology works such as Nonna Mayer's[11] have highlighted. Secondly, the model has the advantage of taking into account the stratifications of all these 'endogenous' elements while leaving space for external pressures to exert an influence on the final outcome. Considering that in the US and France the presidential election is the most widely debated moment in both countries' political lives, the Michigan model is the one that factors in all these elements and provides more awareness of the pre- and post- campaign features of political allegiance.

The funnel structure presents two consequences. Firstly, contingent circumstances like socio-economic issues and electoral campaigns can affect the final decision, but are not integral to the value-building process; in a way, they impact a pre-established sequence rather than replacing it. Secondly, they enter the picture by the time value orientations are cemented in the voter's psychology, which prevents radical reconversion of ideals by leaving a framework of reference: in Europe and France, such framework assumes the notions of left and right. Using Inglehart and Klinghemann's work[12] (1976: 258, 269-270), we identify these concepts as a push for "change aimed at equality" and "emphasis on hierarchical order" respectively, which have historically been

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[11] Mayer, 2002

[12] Inglehart, Klinghemann, 1976, p.258, pp.269-270

popular. In addition to such values, the globalisation process starting in the 1960s triggered off the appearance of self-expression values which would not normally be given importance in conditions of sheer survival. As wealth spread across society, these have become integral to the more cultural aspect of left-right positioning[13]. Consequently, the socio-economic dimension of left and right is interconnected with a libertarian-communitarian axis, reflecting the ideological orientation of either openness or closure to the international society.[14]

With these principles in mind, statistical models show a clear polarisation of the French parties and the presence of both dimensions in defining party agendas, which has been a constant feature in the country's party system[15]. If the 2017 election were a turning point in the dealignment from this compass, surveys should clearly show such rejection. We shall now proceed with analysing the available data.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 assumes that LREM's success is due to the rejection of labels and total adherence to this manifesto as a form of dealignment. Macron's rhetoric about overcoming the left-right cleavage differs from the actual composition of his electorate, which is heterogeneous and frequently employs labels for

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[13] Inglehart, 2003, p.51

[14] Cautrès et al., 2018, p.96

[15] König, Waldvogel, 2018, pp.13-14

ideological reference. In principle, LREM's programme outlines the merging of cultural and economic liberalism, reconciling the features of a left-wing social attitude and a right-wing economic conception[16]. Nonetheless, Rouban[17] reports that only 45% of Macron's *marcheurs* supports income inequalities for the sake of competition, and are still attached to the State's welfare measures for weaker strata. Moreover, the Terra Nova Report on LREM[18] finds that 98% of interviewees accept positioning themselves on the left-right spectrum, instead of rejecting it. Interviews based on 14 indicators regarding the open-closed and the left-right cleavages point out that both measures are employed by LREM electors, with the majority of them insisting on pointing out a clear left-right divide[19]. This aspect supports the first value-building phase in the Michigan model, for electors stress a series of socio-economic preconditions and their historical persistence in order to provide a statement on their politics, rather than making up new categories like Macron's statement seemed to indicate.

It is also interesting to notice that 41.3% of Macron's electors position themselves on the left/centre-left, and 29% on the right/centre-right, which contrasts their recognition of LREM as a functioning effort of synthesis[20]: if the dealignment hypothesis were real, they should not recognise their position on such axis and embrace the "et de droit et de gauche" dogma. This anomaly adds up to Rouban (2018: 92-95)'s finding that only 43% adhered to Macron's

[16] Grunberg, 2017, pp.314-318

[17] Rouban, 2018, pp.34-37, pp.56-57

[18] Cautrès et al., 2018. p.55

[19] Ibid., pp.93-97

[20] Strudel, 2017, pp.213-215; Cautrès et al., 2018, p.68

programme, while remaining voters chose LREM 'by default'. This can be explained by the fact that the two-round electoral system forces voters to pick a new one closer to their original identification. In the context of the funnel of causality, either the candidate image was unsatisfying for a certain orientation, or the first-round's outcome was unfavourable and limits choice by a large margin. An abstention rate over 25%, the lowest since 1969, hints at this discomfort.[21] The external arrows which enter the final layer of the funnel of causality in Figure 1 are a graphical representation of a legitimate, influential factor on voter orientation. Because issue opinions and candidate image are the crucial preconception leading the vote, it is the political structure and the contingent conditions deriving from it that can affect an otherwise consolidated decision process.

Which circumstances went in favour of Macron and Le Pen? Hollande's legacy is a significant factor: among the causes of discontent with his *quinquennat* are a limited budget in the aftermath of the Financial Crisis, and an unpopular 2016 Labour Code reform undermining employee protection. Mobilisation against the perceived betrayal of left-wing values was expressed through street marches and protest acts like Nuit Debout. His successor in the PS leadership, Benoît Hamon, proved to be popular among green-radical fringes, but was not championing the party's line or the now lost centre-left electorate.[22] At the same time, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his new-born movement *La France Insoumise* (FI) obtained 19.58% in the first round by catching the radical left's attention, with

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[21] Muxel, 2017, pp.158-159

[22] Martigny, 2017, pp.44-57

25.1% of his voters being specialised private workers and 23% working-class. Their perception of individual fragility is high, with 26.8% unemployed, 28% on a temporary contract, 26.9% in precarious jobs, and 24.1% on part-time roles. Continuing with the solidity of party identification, 70% of his supporters identify "very much on the left", 89% are former adherents of the *Parti Communiste*, 55% of the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, and 32% of *Lutte Ouvrière*.[23] It is clear that the funnel of causality has a point in portraying such choices as more or less constant, due to their progressive maturation in the voter's psychology: Mélenchon's programme being the closest to original communist messages implied that he gained support from longstanding supporters of such values.

With the elimination of Mélenchon and the chaos in the PS, voters who have since their upbringing followed a socialisation process leaning on the left of the spectrum remain without a representative. Similarly, centre-right voters face the erosion of the Républicains' party, which goes against the values of order and hierarchy embedded in their discourse. When secretary François Fillon was involved in Penelopegate – a scandal involving paying family members for fictitious assignments in the party - the rhetoric of individual promotion and conservativeness lost its main defender.[24] Le Pen's hard line, particularly from the point of view of cultural demarcation vis-à-vis migrant inflows, was too extreme to satisfy the longstanding values of the centre-right. In a situation in which either the most suitable party is in disarray or the other groups lean on more inflexible positions than one's identification would appreciate, a formation

[23] Cautrès, 2017a, pp.186-190
[24] Cautrès, 2017b, pp.64-65

like *En Marche!* serves as a balancing element, whose main representative attempts to embody both sides to achieve his electoral targets.[25] That is, Macron was the only alternative available to the left to prevent a faceoff between Fillon and Le Pen, all the while compensating the centre-right electorate for the Républicains' failure[26]. Once again, we see the "political conditions" described in the Michigan theory being upheld in a real-life case and impacting the long-term mindset in a precise point of one's political experience, much closer to the 'pressure point' of the election where temporary events may transform stakes.

Our interpretation is supported by more recent research about Macron's popularity rates among voters. In October, the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique[27] released the results of a survey asking the French public about the President's actions, summarised below in Figure 2.

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[25] Tiberj, 2017, p.1100

[26] Martigny, 2017, pp.51-52

[27] Institut Français d'Opinion Publique, 2018, p.7

Ventilations – Emmanuel Macron

	Total Satisfaits		Total Mécontents		Ne se prononcent pas		TOTAL
	10/18 (%)	09/18 (%)	10/18 (%)	09/18 (%)	10/18 (%)	09/18 (%)	(%)
ENSEMBLE	**29**	*29*	**70**	*70*	**1**	*1*	**100**
Sexe							
Hommes..	32	31	67	68	1	1	100
Femmes..	27	26	72	73	1	1	100
Age							
18 à 24 ans	43	33	56	65	1	2	100
25 à 34 ans	32	29	66	70	2	1	100
35 à 49 ans	31	29	68	70	1	1	100
50 à 64 ans	22	23	77	77	1	-	100
65 ans et plus	27	31	71	68	2	1	100
Profession du chef de famille							
Commerçants et artisans, chefs d'entreprise ..	47	36	52	63	1	1	100
Cadres et prof. intellectuelles supérieures	41	40	58	59	1	1	100
Professions intermédiaires	29	27	70	72	1	1	100
Employés..	24	24	75	75	1	1	100
Ouvriers..	22	21	76	78	2	1	100
Retraités..	28	28	71	71	1	1	100
Statut de l'interviewé							
Salariés du secteur privé................................	29	28	70	71	1	1	100
Salariés du secteur public	27	24	72	75	1	1	100
Sympathisants du...							
La France Insoumise...	13	11	86	89	1	-	100
Parti Socialiste...	17	18	83	82	-	-	100
Europe Ecologie / Les Verts	25	25	74	74	1	1	100
La République En Marche	86	87	14	13	-	-	100
MoDem.	44	49	52	51	4	-	100
UDI	34	49	65	51	1	-	100
Les Républicains..	27	29	73	70	-	1	100
Rassemblement National (ex FN)	8	9	92	91	-	-	100

Figure 2 Emmanuel Macron's popularity rates by cohorts. Taken from IPOF, Les indices de popularité (October 2018), p. 7.

If on the whole 70% of the sample is unsatisfied with his work and there is an obvious prevalence of FN voters criticising it, the section "Sympathisants du…" points out that the second highest rate of dissatisfaction are among those identifying with parties eliminated in the first round, namely FI (86%), PS (83%), and the Républicains (73%). The comparison with rates in September, shown in the column "Total de mécontents", suggests that the negative trend has been quite constant among those groups whose alignment is far from Macronism's "et de droit et de gauche" philosophy. The results echo another anomalous behaviour among the electorate dating back to the election, namely the use of blank voting: 11.5% of the electorate participating in the second round did not express a preference at all, which is coupled with the already high abstention rate. It is another sign that the two finalists were in different ways not accepted, and that long-term socialisation cannot be easily corrected with political offers: if that happens, it translates into underappreciation of the winner in the following months[28].

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 assumes that the working class, usually considered the stronghold of left-wing ideology, has shifted to the Front National's far right in a "gaucho-lepéniste" realignment: the assumption is based on the finding that 43% of workers support Le Pen and allegedly see her as a working-class defender[29]. This correlation, nonetheless, has little substance and does not account for extensive sociological research conducted since the 1990s. Firstly, continuing to conceive the working class in an industrial sense only does not give justice to the evolution

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[28] Muxel, 2017, pp.167-169
[29] Perrineau, 2017; Fourquet, 2017

of the group in the post-materialist reality. Nowadays, we witness an enlargement of the class including low-service workers as much as unskilled manual labourers: as this socio-economic structure has diversified with time, so does the first level of the funnel in the socialisation process[30]. As a result, one's position in the 'new' working class and their perception of social mobility influences their subjective classification[31], which is not that simplistic and does not automatically link with left-wing ideology.

Nonna Mayer[32] remarked that in her interviews with FN voters, all of them felt comfortable with identifying themselves on the left-right spectrum and associated their decision with their family's political education, just as the Michigan model theorises and the previous section has shown. Of the working-class electors who voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1995, only one fifth revealed not having any particular interest in politics – the so-called *marais*. At the time it was this *niniste* group that massively voted for the party, suggesting that it is mainly disappointment with present candidates to make radicalisation appealing to voters, rather than a conscious and heartfelt realignment from the left: this element links back to the contingent political conditions outlined for Macron vis-à-vis Hollande and Fillon's departure. Mayer[33] has framed the phenomenon as a result of "cultural anxiety", fuelled by both downward mobility and political disaffection in the aftermath of economic austerity. Since the traditional parties struggle to provide solutions to a declining quality of life,

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[30] Gougou, 2015, pp.333-337

[31] Rouban, 2017, pp.114-124

[32] Mayer, 2002, pp.43-52

[33] Mayer, 2014, pp.275-282

voters will entrench in a more radical version of their original ideology: and if we consider that the unemployment rate among the youth is 25%[34], the FN's promise to protect the marginalised resonates with those affected who are already keen to self-place on the right's closed-society cultural dimension.

In Mayer's words[35], it is more realistic to speak of *"ouvriéro-lepénisme"* than "gaucho-lepénisme" because the socialisation process through which these voters go does not always result in left-wing tendencies. Even Pascal Perrinau, who coined the term "gaucho-lepénisme"[36] admits that modern working-class members switch between manual labour and small independent business roles at different points of their upbringing. If a sense of inferiority is common to both, the social division and group loyalty aspects will develop in different directions from the classical left-wing one. In fact, many additional factors have an impact[37], for example: the number of working-class people present in a worker's closest personal relationships; these acquaintances' previous self-placement on the left-right spectrum; and the transformation of the left-right spectrum from a simply economic interpretation to a socio-economic and cultural one. In the last case, this means that younger cohorts will align on a point of the political compass through the discuss of more values than the simple class one. No matter how far this expansion of values goes, it still relies on the concept of past settings

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[34] Pech, 2017, pp.218-220

[35] Mayer, 2002, pp.228-234

[36] Perrinau, 2017, p.94

[37] Gougou, 2015, pp.338-339; Inglehart, Welzel, 2005, pp.98-106

building the emotional and political structure of a voter's mindset, which is outlined in our favoured socialisation process.

Assuming that class belonging captures all elements of party identification risks ignoring crucial aspects of an individual's formation and does not include intergenerational differences in the structure, which instead the funnel of causality fits well. Finally, if the "gaucho-lepénisme" hypothesis were true, the supporters of eliminated parties whose programme was left-leaning should have chosen Le Pen in the second round: nevertheless, the Ipsos Mori electoral poll[38] shows that only 7% of Mélenchon's voters opted for the FN, and most of them abstained or followed En Marche. Even on the right, Fillon's former supporters preferred Macron to Le Pen, while the only majority for Le Pen comes from voters of Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who clearly endorsed Marine as a continuity of their far-right socialisation process. Therefore, the realignment hypothesis is rejected and the findings for Hypothesis 1 hold true: conjunctures may be important, but cannot surpass interiorised values. Rightly so, the Michigan model assumes a certain permanency due to human nature and the way learning, even the political one, is a process rather than a change of heart.

Conclusion

This essay has provided a sociological analysis of the 2017 French presidential election to discuss the idea of dramatic change in the country's political system. It has assessed whether the left-right dimension has disappeared with the birth

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[38] Ipsos Mori electoral poll , 2017, p.4

of LREM and its "et de droit et de gauche" approach to party identification. Simultaneously, it has discussed the claim that the move to the FN of a portion of the working class can be seen as its realignment from the left to the right. Both assumptions have been proven false by the investigation of electoral polls and qualitative assessments from the past 25 years: our findings show that the socio-psychological model of the Michigan school continues to be applicable as it includes many variables in its understanding of how ideological and party identification come about. The acquisition of a set of values throughout an individual's upbringing is not erased by temporary changes, though it is undeniable that contingent events in the single election may not match those values and may require adaptation. Despite that, this does not influence the general ideological framework, but follows the initial preferences in the limits of what is available among candidates. In this specific case, personalisation in the party system seems to be an important factor in determining the least undesirable option, and yet the disruption to the socialisation process appears to be only a mere necessity which will be given up as soon as the political offer matches again the ideological identification previously constructed. Macron and Le Pen's performance, in conclusion, is an electoral deviance in an otherwise continuous design.

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