

Mister Unpopular: François Hollande and the Exercise of Presidential Leadership, 2012–14

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This article examines the first two years of François Hollande's presidential term from a leadership perspective. The central argument is that while Hollande has sometimes been unlucky in the face of unanticipated events and severely constrained by contextual factors outside of his control, notably France's low levels of economic growth, he has also displayed a lack of certain essential leadership qualities. He failed to grasp the scale of the economic situation in the early months of his tenure and so lost precious time in fully addressing the need for structural reforms and engaging in a persuasive pedagogic narrative. In addition, his public communication – an essential leadership quality in the era of mediatised politics – has been poor. Hollande's attempt to relaunch his presidential leadership following the disastrous set of mid-term election results in 2014 marks the start of a new phase in his tenure of the office.

Cet article examine les deux premières années de la présidence de François Hollande en se focalisant sur la question du leadership. Alors que Hollande a parfois été peu chanceux vis-à-vis d'événements imprévus, et sévèrement contraint par des facteurs contextuels qui étaient hors de son contrôle – notamment la croissance économique très faible en France – il a en même temps démontré un manque de certaines qualités qui sont essentielles dans le domaine du leadership. Il n'a pas saisi la gravité de la situation économique dans les premiers mois de son quinquennat et a donc perdu du temps précieux sans réagir de façon adéquate au besoin de réformes structurelles et sans élaborer un récit pédagogique convaincant. De surcroît, sa communication publique – élément essentiel à l'époque de la politique médiatisée – a été peu impressionnante. La tentative de Hollande de relancer son leadership présidentiel suite aux résultats

catastrophiques des élections de 2014 signale le début d'une nouvelle phase de sa présidence.

The public images of François Hollande's celebration of his election to the presidency on 6 May 2012 included a rendition of Édith Piaf's *La vie en rose* in his mayoral fiefdom of Tulle and a highly mediatised kiss with his partner, Valérie Trierweiler, at the Bastille celebrations in Paris. In achieving his career ambition of emulating his mentor, François Mitterrand, by winning the supreme office of the Fifth Republic, Hollande became only the second candidate of the Left to be elected head of state since the establishment of the regime by General de Gaulle in 1958. Just after taking office, Hollande had an approval rating of 61% – a score that in comparison to his predecessors at the start of their presidential term placed him behind de Gaulle (67%, 1958) and Nicolas Sarkozy (65%, 2007), but ahead of Jacques Chirac (59%, 1995), Mitterrand (54%, 1981), Georges Pompidou (54%, 1969) and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (44%, 1974) (IFOP 2012, 8).

Yet by the end of the first year of his presidential term Hollande's approval ratings had declined spectacularly, plummeting to a mere 29%. One year later his popularity had dipped even further, with only an 18% positive evaluation (see Table 1). Moreover, not only did Hollande record a lower score than Sarkozy – who had bottomed out with a 28% approval rating in April 2011 (Opinion Publique 2012) – but he accomplished this unenviable feat at a much earlier point in the presidential term. Detailed opinion poll questioning revealed that many voters, including a significant number of Socialist supporters, were unhappy with the president's policy record (for example, on the cost of living and unemployment) as well as with the way in which he carried out the presidential function. Two years into his five-year term, therefore, Hollande had in the eyes of an overwhelming majority of French voters, including sections of his core electorate, seriously and consistently failed to live up to their expectations.

[Table 1 here]

This popular disenchantment was confirmed in the municipal election in March 2014, with the Socialists experiencing a much heavier defeat than they had anticipated at the hands of the Right, and then in the European election in May of the same year, where the Socialists trailed in a poor third behind the FN (Front national) and the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire). In between these two electoral contests, on a visit to the

traditionally left-wing town of Carmaux to commemorate the centenary of the death of the Socialist leader Jean Jaurès, Hollande was greeted with whistles and boos from the local crowd – a stark contrast to the welcome that had greeted him during the presidential campaign two years previously. Most of the news media evaluation of his presidency was no more encouraging. For instance, on 6 May 2014, the second anniversary of his election victory, the front page of the left-wing national daily, *Libération*, which had supported the Socialist candidate in 2012, was dominated by the scathing title: ‘Deux ans après, Hollande cherche président’. In short, opinion poll findings, election results, public reaction in the streets and much of the coverage in the media – all combined to convey the same feeling of disillusionment with the head of state at the end of his first two years in office.

This article examines key aspects of Hollande’s presidential leadership, arguing that while he has sometimes been unlucky in the face of unanticipated events and severely constrained by contextual factors outside of his control, he has also displayed a lack of certain essential leadership skills. The article is organised in four sections. The first part examines Hollande’s presidential campaign in 2012. The next two sections concentrate on his presidential tenure up until the summer of 2014, focusing on contextual and leadership factors respectively. The final part covers Hollande’s attempt to relaunch his presidency following the disastrous set of mid-term election results in 2014.

A lucky, successful, but not wholly convincing presidential candidate

Hollande benefited from huge slices of luck as a presidential candidate, to such an extent that after his electoral victory he was even described as an ‘accidental president’ (Cole et al 2013, 11–13). The ambitions of the opinion polls’ favourite to win the Socialist party nomination, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, went up in smoke in May 2011 when he was arraigned in New York on charges of serious sexual assault. The only other serious contender, the party’s first secretary Martine Aubry, hesitated before deciding to stand and thus entered the race after Hollande had already established his credentials as the new front-runner. With 56.6% of the vote, Hollande defeated her convincingly in the decisive second round of the Socialist primaries.

In several key respects Hollande conformed to the norms of a serious *présidentiable*, including his education at Sciences Po in Paris and then at ENA (École nationale d’administration) and his long spell as head of the Socialist party. The main gap in his

political cv, however, was the total lack of any ministerial experience either during the two five-year periods of Socialist-dominated government during the Mitterrand presidency or in the ‘plural left’ cohabitation government of prime minister Lionel Jospin. Moreover, even in the position of first secretary of the Socialist party (1997–2008) Hollande acquired the reputation of being a manager who sought to minimise conflict and pursue consensus across the different factions. His reluctance to assert his authority was particularly evident during the 2005 referendum campaign on the European constitution when Hollande allowed the party to be openly divided and he lost legitimacy by backing the losing ‘Yes’ side in the popular vote (Hainsworth 2006)

In the presidential contest Hollande benefited from the severely tarnished image of Sarkozy, the strong challenge to the incumbent posed by the FN candidate, Marine Le Pen, the incoherent campaign of the Centre candidate, François Bayrou, and the damaging legacy of the economic and financial crisis on Sarkozy’s record of policy achievements (Kuhn and Murray 2013; Perrineau 2013). Hollande’s victory seemed such a foregone conclusion during the long campaign that it is scarcely surprising that Evans and Ivaldi (2013) subtitled their study of the contest *The Inevitable Alternation*. In terms of election results, Hollande performed well. In the first round he topped the poll of ten candidates, thereby securing the psychological advantage of coming ahead of the incumbent, with a 28.6% vote share compared to Sarkozy’s 27.2%. In the subsequent head-to-head second round run-off Hollande defeated his right-wing rival with a 51.6% to 48.4% share of the vote – a conclusive if not triumphal victory, reminiscent of Mitterrand’s margin over Giscard d’Estaing in 1981 (51.8% to 48.2%).

Yet these headline figures scarcely tell the whole story. Hollande’s election strategy was one among several factors (including the campaigns of the other eight anti-Sarkozy candidates and much of the news media reporting) that helped frame the 2012 electoral contest largely as a referendum on Sarkozy. Labbé and Monière argue that whereas in 1981 Mitterrand had put more emphasis on his own programme than on the presidential record of his opponent, the 2012 campaign was characterised by a ‘spiral of negativity’ in which Hollande gave more weight to the failure of Sarkozy than to his own proposals (2104, 207–208). The register of ‘indignation’ represented 42.5% of the emotional repertory in Hollande’s campaign, compared with only 28.4% for Mitterrand’s in 1981 (Ballet 2014, 180). Against this background Hollande’s credentials for the top office did not influence voter preferences as much as they might have done in other circumstances. His victory was as much a rejection of the incumbent as a positive endorsement of his

own candidacy (Bell and Gaffney 2013, 22); in the second round almost one-third of votes for Hollande were cast principally to stop Sarkozy winning a subsequent term (Sineau and Cautrès 2013, 230). Hollande did not even manage to secure over 50% of all those who participated in the second round, since over two million voters returned a blank or spoiled ballot.

There was therefore no foundation of strong popular support at the start of his presidency, with the result that the post-election ‘honeymoon’ period was very short. Moreover, in terms of the evolution of voting intentions during the long campaign the picture is particularly revealing. In October 2011, immediately following Hollande’s success in the Socialist party primary contest, opinion polls gave him a 15% lead over his main rival in the first round (39%–24%) and a 20% lead in the second (60%–40%) (LH2 2011). In the six months between October 2011 and April 2012, therefore, Hollande lost about 10% of popular support in respect of the first round and 8% in respect of the second (albeit starting from an ‘unnaturally’ high level).

A more detailed analysis of voters’ views helps clarify their perceptions of Hollande’s performance as a candidate during the long campaign (Boy and Chiche 2013). Hollande scored strongly on the following qualities: ‘à des convictions’, ‘n’inquiète pas’, ‘sympathique’, ‘honnête’ and ‘sincère’. In contrast, he had a low score with regard to being ‘dynamique’, where he was the only major candidate to receive a majority of negative ratings. What is particularly striking about Hollande’s performance during the long campaign is that on virtually every indicator his performance declined the more the campaign went on, albeit with some short-lived improvements, notably after his heavily mediated first major campaign speech at Le Bourget in late January 2012. For instance, while in November 2011 75% of respondents considered that Hollande ‘à des convictions’, on the eve of the first round of voting this had dropped to 65%; in similar vein 60% of respondents had a ‘bonne opinion’ of the Socialist candidate in November, but this had dropped to 51% by April. Finally, while in November 53% of respondents considered that Hollande had ‘la stature présidentielle’, by April only 46% shared this view. Of the major candidates, Hollande was the one whose positive ratings dropped the most during the long campaign (albeit frequently from a strong initial level).

Hollande’s decline during the long campaign was in stark contrast to Sarkozy, whose scores improved as the campaign progressed. On the question of having ‘la stature présidentielle’ he was ahead of Hollande both consistently and by a significant margin (perhaps unsurprisingly as he was after all the incumbent). Ironically in the light of the

result, Hollande was considered less capable than Sarkozy of dealing with the economic crisis (Reynié 2013, 206), which was the frequently articulated major concern of voters. Moreover, on the eve of the decisive second round of voting more French voters feared a degradation of the state of the country under a future president Hollande (46%) than a second-term president Sarkozy (41%) (Jaffré 2013, 224). Finally, one might note that at no point during the campaign did Hollande achieve a majority positive rating in response to the question of whether he ‘tiendra ses engagements’, even if among the major candidates he scored highest on this indicator with a peak of 47% in February 2012 (down to 43% by the eve of the first round). Thus, voters were able simultaneously to give Hollande reasonably high scores for being ‘honest’, ‘sincere’ and ‘competent’ and yet still doubt whether he would ‘keep his promises’ if elected. The main point to note from this survey data is that popular disaffection with Hollande did not begin with his tenure at the Elysée. A considerable degree of voter scepticism was already evident when he was a candidate during the long presidential campaign.

An unlucky president?

The consistently low popularity ratings for Hollande for most of the first two years of his presidential term raise some obvious questions. Why has he performed so badly? Why has he been held in such low public esteem? And why did voters turn away from him so quickly? As part of an answer to these questions, this section examines some contextual variables that were to a significant extent outside of Hollande’s control – factors that might have had an impact on the popularity ratings of any incumbent of the Elysée after 2012.

The first possible explanation for Hollande’s unpopularity is that he has simply been unfortunate: a ‘lucky candidate’ quickly transformed into an ‘unlucky president’. The Cahuzac affair in the spring 2013 might be regarded as a good example of Hollande’s presidential misfortune (Chaffanjon 2013). First there was the timing. Cahuzac publicly confessed to his wrongdoing on 2 April, only a few days after a major television interview by the president that had been intended to show Hollande reasserting his authority and coming to grips with the concerns of the French electorate (france2.fr 2013). Coming at the end of four months of media spin by Cahuzac and his communication advisors in an attempt to refute the allegations first made by the independent news website Mediapart on 4 December 2012 (Arfi 2013; Hermann and

Giraudat 2014, 17–60), the timing of Cahuzac’s confession could hardly have been worse. Hollande’s televised message was drowned out by the subsequent adverse media coverage that focused on the illegal financial holdings of the minister of the Budget and the fact that he had lied to the president, the National Assembly, the news media and the public.

In addition to the attempted ministerial cover-up, the substance of the scandal was particularly shocking to public opinion. That the minister in charge of the fight against fiscal fraud had been found with a secret illegal bank account abroad (first in Switzerland and then in Singapore) constituted a nightmare lose-lose scenario for the head of state. If Hollande had known and done nothing, then he stood accused of complicity with the offence; if the president had not known or not even suspected, then he was open to charges of incompetence and naïveté. While Hollande was in no way responsible for Cahuzac’s breach of the law, in terms of his presidential image the Cahuzac affair blew out of the water any claims that Hollande might have had of incarnating a ‘république exemplaire’ in contrast to the scandal-ravaged presidential term of Sarkozy. In the wake of the minister’s revelations, several media outlets vented their spleen, engaging in a wave of what the French media call ‘Hollande bashing’: ‘Pépère’ est-il à la hauteur? (*Le Point*, 2013); ‘Monsieur faible’ (*L’Express*, 2013); ‘L’homme qui n’en savait jamais rien’ (*VSD*, 2013) and ‘Gauche, Qui pilote?’ (*Libération*, 2013). Hollande was left to engage in a damage limitation exercise with new legislation on transparency in public life introduced in an attempt to salvage some reputational credit from the political wreckage. Yet even this initiative led critics to argue that Hollande was now imitating Sarkozy in addressing a problem through a knee-jerk legislative response.

A second possible explanation for Hollande’s unpopularity lies with the abnormally severe impact of the economic situation. Like many other countries France has in recent years had to cope with the effects of a global banking crisis that transformed into a sovereign debt crisis and, within the eurozone, a euro crisis. Hollande came to power at a time when the French economy was performing poorly, as evidenced by low levels of economic growth (0.3% in 2012, 0.3% in 2013 and 0% in each of the first two quarters of 2014 (Insee 2014a; 2014b) – compared with 2.4 % in 2007, the year in which Sarkozy came to power. Public debt has also increased: 90.6% of GDP by the end of 2012 and 93.5% by the end of 2013 (Insee 2014c) – compared with 63.2% at the end of 2007 (Insee 2014d). Against this economic background Hollande was unable to keep his promise to reverse the trend of growing unemployment by the end of 2013.

When Hollande came to office the unemployment rate was 9.7%; in January 2014 it stood at 10.2% and it was at this same level in June (*LesEchos.fr* 2014a). In May 2014 the European Commission forecast that the French unemployment rate would rise to 10.4% for 2014 and fall back, but only to 10.2%, in 2015 (*LesEchos.fr* 2014b). The structural constraint of France's comparative lack of international competitiveness among advanced industrial countries made it difficult for France to benefit fully from any economic upturn in the global economy. It was little consolation that other eurozone countries were themselves experiencing very low levels of growth at the same time. Consequently, despite specific policy measures to help those seeking work, notably among the young, the president's pledge on employment could not be achieved because a sufficiently high level of economic growth (it is generally agreed that around 1.5% is required to have an impact on employment) was not forthcoming. In August 2014 the minister of Finance, Michel Sapin, announced that growth would be of the order of 0.5% for 2014 and would probably not exceed 1% in 2015 (*Le Monde.fr* 2014a).

In addition, the economic consequences of the financial crisis within the eurozone during the Sarkozy presidency had shown the extent to which the Franco-German axis within the European Union (EU) was becoming increasingly dominated by Germany (Clift and Ryner 2014). Hollande's attempts to push for a greater growth stimulus within the EU at the start of his presidency, and again in 2014, came to nothing as it conflicted with Chancellor Angela Merkel's emphasis on austerity. Moreover, in a symbolic blow to Hollande's international leadership credentials, after his accession to the Italian premiership in February 2014 Matteo Renzi grabbed the media headlines as the new reformist figure of the Left in the European Council. In terms of France's economic performance and its status within the EU, therefore, it could be argued that Hollande came to power at a difficult moment for the country, with challenges that would have tested the skills of any president.

A third explanation for Hollande's unpopularity can be found in the disjuncture between structural limits on the exercise of presidential power on the one hand and voter expectations of a powerful executive on the other. In political terms there were few checks and balances to constrain Hollande's dominance of the institutions of the Fifth Republic. His success in the presidential contest was confirmed a few weeks later when the Left won the parliamentary election. With just over 300 seats out of 577 in the National Assembly the Socialists and affiliated candidates had a majority on their own in the new legislature. In addition, the new government led by prime minister Jean-Marc

Ayrault had the support of the Radicaux de gauche (13 seats) and the environmentalists, Europe-Écologie-Les Verts (EELV) (18 seats), which gave it both a more comfortable numerical majority and a more inclusive centre-left parliamentary base. The Left also had a narrow majority in the Senate, as well as controlling the vast majority of regional councils and most large towns in France. Not even during Mitterrand's presidency (1981–95) had the Left achieved such complete dominance of the representative institutions of the regime.

Yet this appearance of one-party domination, with the president at the apex of the political system, is misleading. French presidential elections are still largely contested as if the nation-state were the inviolable political unit of authority and centre of decision-making, with a powerful directly elected president in charge of policy-making. Needless to say, many candidates for the presidential office have done little to dissuade voters in this respect. Yet it is indisputable that any contemporary incumbent of the Elysée enjoys far less freedom of manoeuvre in economic policy (and other policy fields) than the early presidents of the Fifth Republic. Whatever their partisan complexion, size of parliamentary majority or political skills, any president now enjoys far less autonomous power than, say, Pompidou who as president (1969–74) was largely responsible for the industrial modernisation of the country – a task that he had previously overseen as de Gaulle's prime minister in the 1960s.

Two developments in particular have significantly reduced the autonomous sphere of presidential authority over the past twenty-five years or so (Hayward 2013). First, European integration, beginning with the creation of the single European market in 1992 and extended with the formation of the eurozone in 1999–2000, has imposed severe limits on national freedom of manoeuvre. Among these constraints one of the most notable is the public deficit limit of 3% of GDP imposed as part of the Stability and Growth Pact. In recent years France has frequently exceeded this threshold as it sought, with considerable success, to protect its citizens from the fallout of the eurozone crisis. However, France's failure to reduce its public deficit – 4.9% in 2012 and 4.3% in 2013 (Insee 2014c) – has now begun to strain the tolerance of the European Commission. In the early summer of 2014 the French government's formal position remained the achievement of the 3% target by the end of 2015. By mid-August, however, the government admitted that in 2014 the deficit would once again be above 4% (*Le Monde.fr* 2014a) and it was to say the least unlikely that the 3% target would be met the following year.

In addition, membership of the eurozone means that France does not have the freedom to devalue its national currency in a bid to improve its export competitiveness and balance of payments, a manoeuvre undertaken on no fewer than three occasions by Mitterrand in the early years of his first presidential term. During the Hollande presidency French political elites of both Left and Right have argued that the euro is overvalued and that this contributes to the country's lack of competitiveness and commercial deficit, while the FN has campaigned for a straightforward French withdrawal from the eurozone. Yet any managed devaluation of the euro, although not an impossible scenario because of the general economic climate within the eurozone, is not within France's control, while withdrawal from the single currency would be politically impossible for Hollande to contemplate.

The second constraining factor on the presidential sphere of influence is globalisation. In certain respects France has benefited from the opening up of global markets; 32 French companies featured in the top 500 global league table in 2012 (compared with 32 for Germany and 26 for the UK) (La documentation française 2013, 126). In contrast, globalisation has also fostered the outsourcing of jobs, accelerated the decline of France's manufacturing sector, and hit particularly hard those citizens with low levels of education and employment skills. While French voters are aware of the changed nature of global economic competition and the rise of new economic powers, such as China, many still hanker back to the days of the so-called 'trente glorieuses' (Fourastié 1979). A high proportion of French people regard globalisation in negative terms, more so than citizens of most other EU member states; at the end of 2013, for instance, 52% of French citizens viewed globalisation as a threat, while only 36% saw it as an opportunity (European Commission 2013, 10).

A failure of leadership?

Bad luck, a difficult economic situation and limited freedom of manoeuvre for France in more open European and global markets are three contextual variables that undoubtedly go a long way (some might argue most of the way) to explaining Hollande's political difficulties and electoral unpopularity during the first two years of his term of office. Yet even combined, they fall short of a wholly satisfactory explanation. This is because they do not take into account the degree of autonomy, however limited, available to political leaders to shape the political agenda, steer policy and engage in effective public

communication. Agency can make a difference, even in the most difficult of circumstances. This is not to argue that Sarkozy, Strauss-Kahn or Aubry would certainly have performed more successfully in terms of presidential leadership than Hollande; simply that the theoretical possibility cannot just be dismissed.

In this section the emphasis is placed on the leadership skills of Hollande. The argument is that he has not only lacked some substantive leadership qualities, but also failed to project an image of effective leadership in the mediated public sphere. There is no agreement among political scientists as to the skills required for effective leadership or the criteria by which successful leadership should be assessed. In his evaluation of US presidents, for example, Greenstein (2009) focuses on their ability to carry out six functions: public communicator, organisational capacity, political skill, vision of public policy, cognitive style and emotional intelligence. Using what they term a ‘statecraft approach’ to the assessment of political leadership in Britain, Buller and James emphasise four statecraft functions: a winning electoral strategy, governing competence, party management and political argument hegemony (i.e. winning the battle of ideas) (2012, 538–43).

It is reasonable to ask whether leadership studies based on the US presidential and British parliamentary models are transferable to the formally semi-presidential system of the Fifth Republic. Perhaps only with circumspection, since it is likely that the particular combination of skills required by an executive leader in an advanced democracy will be influenced by among other things the institutional configuration of the political system, the degree of checks and balances between key political actors, the dominant values of the elite political culture, the template of leadership set by preceding incumbents, the structures and functioning of the news media, and public expectations of political leadership as shaped by a range of historical and cultural factors. Yet at the same time, the specificities of the presidential leadership dimension in the Fifth Republic are by no means unique or even exceptional.

For instance, the statecraft approach (see Stacey 2013 on Sarkozy) has the merit of focusing attention away from accounts that emphasise the ‘character’, ‘personality’ or ‘style’ of the leader – an approach that is strongly present in some academic studies of French presidents (for example, De Sutter and Immelman 2008 and Gaffney 2012), as well as several written by political journalists (Giesbert 2006; 2011). The presidential leadership of Sarkozy in particular was frequently the subject of studies that focused significantly on the impact of certain personality traits on his image and mode of

governing (Richard 2008; Dive 2012). More recent journalistic assessments of Hollande's presidential style have included coverage of his alleged penchant for micro-management and chronic indecisiveness (the military intervention in Mali being an apparent exception to the rule) (Revault d'Allonnes 2014).

How might one assess Hollande's presidency in terms of governing competence, party management and winning the battle of ideas? One might start with Hollande's own initial view of his presidential role. During the 2012 campaign Hollande made the remark that he wanted to be a 'président normal', a way of differentiating his candidacy from the incumbency of Sarkozy. Hollande did not intend to be a Sarkozy-style hyperactive president. A vague analytic concept, the notion of 'président normal' was open to contrasting interpretations: did it mean a desire to return to a classic Gaullian version of presidentialism whereby the president set the main orientations of policy but (in theory) stood above the party battle or did it refer more simply to an abnegation of the bling-bling excesses of his predecessor and a desire to be an 'ordinary' leader in touch with the electorate (Perrineau 2013, 15)?

If Hollande meant the former, then he was quickly to discover various problems with the implementation of this interpretation of 'président normal' for twenty-first century presidential leadership. First, he did not – nobody could – incarnate the template of strong, far less heroic, leadership as personified by de Gaulle (Gaffney 2010). Second, the shortening of the presidential term to five years has made it difficult for the president to abstain from implication in governing the country and shelter behind the 'shield' of his prime minister. Third, while French voters may not have appreciated the hyperactive interventionism of president Sarkozy, this did not mean that they wanted their president to stand back from taking responsibility at a time of severe economic problems. Fourth, the expansion of the media, including rolling news channels and social media, has amplified the personalisation of political news coverage, while the speeding up of the 24/7 news cycle has created pressure on elite political figures to be in constant mediated contact with the public. Finally, the frequency of opinion poll findings constitute a constant public reminder of a president's standing with voters. For all these reasons, the classic Gaullian version of presidentialism is now out of date. Hollande became involved in the daily minutiae of government more than he had said he would during the 2012 campaign head-to-head television debate with Sarkozy (*Le nouvel Observateur*.fr 2012).

In so doing Hollande sometimes undermined the authority of his prime minister by allowing ministers to bypass Ayrault, go directly to the Elysée for a decision and be

supported by Hollande against the views of his prime minister. Hollande could also undermine his prime minister directly. For instance, in November 2013 Ayrault announced an ambitious reform of France's tax system, only to be later publicly overruled by the president. While these were scarcely new developments in Fifth Republic executive relations (the relationship between president Mitterrand and prime minister Michel Rocard between 1988 and 1991 was infinitely more damaging), in terms of governing competence they contributed to the impression of a lack of coordination at the top. In terms of party management Holland has failed to persuade many Socialist deputies that his economic reform package (see next section) is the best way forward, with several openly rebelling in the wake of the 2014 election results (see article by Gérard Grunberg). In the parliamentary vote on the government's stability programme 2014–17, for instance, three PS deputies voted against and 41 others abstained, with various Socialist deputies arguing that the package gave too much to private sector companies without any guarantee of a return in terms of improved employment prospects (francetvinfo.fr 2014a).

Hollande's leadership qualities (or the lack of them) have been called into question by voters. In a February 2014 opinion poll, for instance, 84% of respondents agreed with the proposition that 'on a besoin d'un vrai chef en France pour remettre de l'ordre' (IPSOS 2014), with the clear inference to be drawn that Hollande was not such a 'real leader'. Hollande's supporters might argue that on the subject of French intervention in Mali (see article by Tony Chafer) and the socially divisive issue of gay marriage (see article by Andrew Knapp) the president did demonstrate strong and effective leadership. Indeed opponents of the marriage reform legislation criticised his intransigence in imposing the legislation without seeking any form of compromise with their views.

Yet there were several occasions when governing competence was lacking. On the question of the possible closure of the steel furnaces at Florange in the Lorraine region in late 2012, for instance, Hollande allowed his government to look indecisive, with the minister for industrial regeneration, Arnaud Montebourg, publicly supporting a provisional nationalisation, while prime minister Ayrault adopted a quite different line (Astruc and Freyssenet 2013). Even on the gay marriage issue Hollande initially suggested that mayors might be allowed to choose not to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies and then had to backtrack to assert that the legislation had to be applied equally nationwide. In the international domain Hollande miscalculated on the question of military involvement in Syria in the late summer of 2013, overestimating France's

influence in the international community, underestimating the resistance to such intervention in the UK and USA and as a result leaving France diplomatically isolated (Gaffney 2014).

Hollande failed to grasp the scale of the economic situation in the early months of his tenure and so lost precious time in fully addressing the need for structural reforms. He also could have engaged sooner in the pedagogical task of conveying to voters the importance of, and benefits to be gained from, France's adjustment to the competitive conditions of the interdependent global economy – what Meunier has called the 'gap between political discourse and policy action' (2006, 340). He did not adequately manage the expectations of the electorate with regard to tough economic times ahead or the need for spending cuts. In this respect Hollande has certainly not been unique among French political leaders of both Left and Right in recent years; see, for instance, president Chirac's reluctance to engage in reform for fear of the possible ensuing social protest (Knapp 2013, 172–3). Yet in Hollande's case the contrast between his campaign discourse ('Mon adversaire, c'est la finance') and his supply-side policy of providing support to French companies while raising taxes and cutting public expenditure has left much of the Socialist electorate confused, bewildered and disappointed. It is not that Hollande made a host of rash, leftist promises during his campaign – his pledge to introduce a 75% upper tax rate was the exception rather than the rule. It is rather that he did not adequately prepare the ground for the politics of austerity (although the term is never employed by Socialist elites) that he has had to embrace. Perhaps, as Grossman and Sauger (2014) argue, it is just too difficult to square the circle of campaign rhetoric as a candidate and policy delivery as president?

To be fair to Hollande it is not an easy task to introduce fundamental reform measures that in the short term have a negative impact on particular social groups and electoral clienteles. Corporatist practices among different professions are well-entrenched in France (Algan and Cahuc 2007). Moreover, a concerted drive to reduce the size of the public sector immediately comes up against the problem that these employees are one of the Socialist party's main electoral reservoirs of support. In 2013 the huge public demonstrations on the gay marriage issue and the protests in Brittany against the introduction of environmentally-friendly road taxes on heavy vehicles (l'écotaxe) were also a reminder of the potential power of direct action to act as a focus for popular discontent. In such a context there is something to be said for trying to build a consensus for reform among interested stakeholders. This is what Hollande has tried to do with his

tripartite discussions involving government, business leaders and trade union representatives in an attempt to overcome what frequently appears to be an adversarial bargaining culture. Yet while business leaders' criticisms, echoed by the UMP, are that proposed reforms do not go far enough, opposition to the president's economic policy has come from some trade unions (notably, the Confédération Générale du Travail and Force Ouvrière) as well as the Front de gauche, the EELV and Socialist party rebels. At times it seems that Hollande can neither impose nor persuade (or even decide which of the two options to choose).

In addition to leadership defects in governing competence and party management, Hollande has demonstrated a lack of effectiveness in political communication (Pingaud 2013). This is an important leadership defect since public communication skills, the effective use of symbolic politics and the management of voter expectations via news media agenda construction and issue framing are now part of the essential repertoire of leadership qualities for heads of state and government in advanced democracies (Pfetsch 2008). In some ways the charge against Hollande in this respect is surprising, since prior to his election he had the reputation of enjoying good relations with political journalists. Yet this interdependence between politician and journalist is only one aspect of news media management and image projection in the age of mediatised politics. In other respects Hollande has been found wanting. For instance, in his public communication Hollande has often appeared lacklustre. In the spring of 2013 a television interview with David Pujadas on France 2 failed to convince voters that the president was in control, despite – or more likely because of – his reference to the deployment of all the 'tools' in his presidential 'toolbox' to address the country's economic ills (francetvinfo.fr 2013a).

More importantly, it has been difficult to decipher a coherent presidential communication strategy. Jacques Pilhan, the communication advisor to president Mitterrand and then to president Jacques Chirac, believed in the rarity of media appearances on the grounds that the more the head of state spoke, the less impact their message had (Bazin 2009). In contrast, Sarkozy believed that the president had to occupy media space on daily basis and impose control over the news media agenda (Kuhn 2010). Hollande has chosen neither of these options in any consistent manner, but instead has reacted to events in a haphazard fashion. In part this strategic communication deficit is related to the fact that for much of the first two years of his tenure Hollande had nobody at the Elysée in overall charge of presidential communication (Amar 2014, 115–23).

The result has sometimes been catastrophic for the president's image. A notable example is the Leonarda affair in October 2013 when Hollande effectively ended up in a two-way televised dialogue with a young Roma girl, Leonarda Dibrani, who had just been expelled from France with her family. Faced with growing criticism of the initial decision, including street protests by high school pupils, Hollande's proposed compromise – that the girl could return to France to pursue her education, but without the rest of her family – was greeted with incomprehension by his supporters and derision by the media and his opponents (francetvinfo.fr 2013b). In addition, during Ayrault's premiership (May 2012–March 2014) there was a series of communication spats between government ministers played out in the news media. These also contributed to a sense of lack of communicative coherence at the heart of the executive. Finally, it could be argued that Hollande's presidency has lacked an overarching 'storytelling' narrative or 'big idea' (like prime minister Chaban-Delmas's 'New Society' project in 1969) to provide a coherent framework – ideational and communicative – within which to explain and defend controversial policy decisions (Salmon 2007).

The reassertion of presidential leadership?

There are often key moments in presidential terms when the incumbent seeks to send out a strong symbolic message and tries to turn the tide of events through dramatic, headline-grabbing actions. During the Hollande presidency this moment came in the period immediately following the municipal election in March 2014. The election itself represented a heavy defeat for the Left in general and the Socialist party in particular (Kuhn 2014). The Left lost control of 151 towns of over 10,000 inhabitants, including ten of over 100,000, as the Right swept to victory. Among the large towns lost by the Left were Amiens, Angers, Argenteuil, Caen, Limoges, Reims, Saint-Étienne, Toulouse and Tours, while the main consolations for the Left were that it retained control of Paris and Lyon. In Marseille, where the local Socialists were tainted by corruption allegations, the Left experienced a rout, while within the mainstream Left bloc the Socialist party lost Grenoble to the EELV.

As mayors and local councillors are responsible for electing representatives to the upper house of the French parliament, the municipal results meant that the Left was almost certain to lose its slim majority in the Senate in the election scheduled for the autumn of 2014. The Socialists' belief – feigned or sincere – that the municipal election

would be fought on local issues and that their town hall record would stand them in good stead proved to be well wide of the mark. Instead it was clear that many voters had taken the opportunity to sanction the president and his government, while many Socialist supporters had simply abstained to show their discontent. Local Socialist-dominated councils had paid the price for presidential unpopularity. The front page headline in *Le Monde* following the second round summed up the scale of the defeat for the Left and its impact on the president: ‘Hollande pris dans le piège d’une déroute historique’ (*Le Monde*, 1 April 2014). The front cover pages of other print media in the aftermath of the result were equally scathing: for example, ‘La France en colère’ (*Marianne* 2014) and ‘Vite, on coule!’ (*Le Point* 2014).

Hollande’s reassertion of his presidential leadership was immediate; his relaunch strategy consisted of four components. First, there was a change of prime minister. Ayrault had never succeeded in imposing his authority on government ministers or the parliamentary party. He was also singularly lacking in charisma – on television he came across as a man with a significant amount of stage absence. More importantly, he had failed in the near-impossible task of shielding the president from unpopularity. It was not that Ayrault was a rival to Hollande or held any presidential ambitions, unlike Jacques Chaban-Delmas (Pompidou’s first prime minister), Chirac (Giscard d’Estaing’s first prime minister) or François Fillon (Sarkozy’s prime minister). Indeed his unswerving loyalty to Hollande was one of Ayrault’s principal virtues. It was simply that he contributed nothing to the public face of the Hollande presidency – there was no ‘value added’. In the light of the election results, Ayrault’s loyalty proved to be an insufficient resource for him to retain his post.

The day after the second round of the municipal election he was dismissed and replaced as prime minister by the outgoing minister of the Interior, Manuel Valls. A candidate in the 2011 Socialist primary, where he had secured 5.6% of the vote in the first round, Valls was regarded as being on the right of the party. A strong supporter of secularist values, in 2010 he had been one of only fourteen Socialist deputies to support the so-called Burqa ban introduced by Sarkozy. During his period at the Interior ministry Valls had articulated a hard line on law and order (which was a major factor in his public popularity) and was frequently presented in the media as a Left version of Sarkozy (francetvinfo.fr 2014b). For instance, on more than one occasion he declared that the Rom community were incapable of integrating into French society and in so doing

evoked memories of Sarkozy's verbal excesses (Revault d'Allonnes and Borredon 2014, 105–8; 240–5).

The appointment of Valls as prime minister indicated no major ideological or policy shift: Hollande had already moved from the centre-left promises of his 2012 campaign to a more 'social liberal' emphasis on the importance of making France more competitive. In December 2013 the president had announced a supply-side 'responsibility pact' between business, trade unions and the state in an attempt to encourage business investment and so reduce unemployment by lowering the state-imposed financial levies on companies: €40 billion over a four-year period was the sum trumpeted by the government (*Le Monde.fr* 2014a). The Ayrault government had also pledged to reduce public expenditure by €50 billion over three years, starting with a €21 billion cut in 2015. This two-pronged attempt to improve French economic performance was taken on by Valls, with some minor tweaking in the run-up to the European election in May to reassure voters and assuage those on the left of the party who regarded the policy as a betrayal of Socialist values.

Instead the appointment of Valls was designed to secure four principal objectives. The first was to send a strong signal to various actors (the EU, financial markets, credit rating agencies, French business leaders, the trade unions, rebel Socialist parliamentarians and the media) that the president was not going to backtrack on his competitiveness agenda. The second was to provide a greater sense of coherence and organisational efficiency to the policy-making process (Portail du Gouvernement 2014). The third was to provide the government with a more centralised and effective communication strategy. Valls had been Lionel Jospin's communication advisor during the latter's cohabitation premiership of the plural left government and had served as communication director for Hollande during the 2012 presidential campaign. He was renowned for his forthright speaking and his ability to impose a single message from the top. Indeed, Valls's communication skills were one of his main assets in comparison with Ayrault. Hollande's fourth objective was to send a signal to the electorate, especially Socialist voters, that the president had taken on board the significance of the municipal election results. In this respect the change of prime minister had an immediate effect; while in March 2014 Ayrault's popularity stood at 23%, in early April Valls's was at 58% (although it could be pointed out that Ayrault had started out at 65% when appointed in May 2012) (IFOP 2014a; 2014b). The conundrum for Hollande was how to square the circle of not changing the fundamentals of policy while still acknowledging the electorate's clear

dissatisfaction (ie reconciling the policy and electoral objectives). The other problem for Hollande was that his new prime minister was far more popular than he was.

The second component of Hollande's relaunch strategy was a new governmental team. A few ministers retained their previous position, notably Laurent Fabius as Foreign Affairs minister and Christiane Taubira as minister of Justice. In contrast, some leading ministers in the Ayrault government, such as Pierre Moscovici at Finance and Vincent Peillon at Education, did not figure in the new administration. The interior ministry, vacated by Valls, was given to a Hollande loyalist, Bernard Cazeneuve, while Arnaud Montebourg was promoted to the post of minister of the Economy. A new ministerial entrant was Ségolène Royal, the defeated Socialist candidate in the 2007 presidential election and the former partner of Hollande, who became minister of Ecology. This post had been offered to the EELV in an attempt to retain them as part of the governing coalition, but to no avail. As a result, there was no EELV party member in the Valls government (the environmentalists had had one full and one junior minister under Ayrault) as the party distanced itself from Hollande and his new prime minister. In terms of coalition maintenance, failure to keep the EELV in the government's parliamentary majority can be regarded as a defect of presidential leadership.

The third component was the appointment of a new general secretary at the Elysée and a revamped advisory team. Out went the technocrat, Pierre Lamas, to be replaced by Jean-Pierre Jouyet. Jouyet had been part of Hollande's class (*promotion Voltaire*) at ENA, a minister for Europe in the early part of the Sarkozy presidency (2007–8) as part of the latter's policy of opening up ministerial appointments to figures from outside the Right (*l'ouverture*) and head of the financial regulatory authority, l'Autorité des marchés financiers (2008–12). He thus combined three desirable qualities in the eyes of the president: a shared background, an intimate knowledge of the European Union and a familiarity with the world of finance. This change at the top of the Elysée team was quickly followed by the eviction of one of Hollande's key political advisors, Aquilino Morelle, whose alleged involvement in a past conflict of interest with a pharmaceutical company was revealed by Mediapart. The president's economic advisor, Emmanuel Macron, also left to be replaced by Laurence Boone, former chief economist (Europe) for the Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Boone had no links with the Socialist party, nor the upper echelons of the civil service, but had significant experience in the global financial sector. Only a few days before her appointment in June 2014 she had written in the pro-

business newspaper *L'Opinion* that the French government lacked a 'credible economic policy' (*Le Monde.fr*. 2014b).

The fourth and final part was the selection of a new first secretary for the Socialist party. After his arrival at the Elysée Hollande had imposed his chosen candidate, Harlem Désir, as first secretary so as to ensure his control of the party. The result was shambolic. Not only was the process of Désir's appointment criticised as being authoritarian, but more importantly Désir had singularly failed to impose his authority or to ensure the organisation's transition into a party of government. In many parts of the country the party was moribund and unwilling to campaign forcefully for the president's agenda. The municipal election results sealed Désir's fate. He was moved into a junior ministerial post and replaced as first secretary by Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, who had been one of Strauss-Kahn's leading supporters prior to the events of May 2011.

None of these initiatives had any impact on the fortunes of the Left in general or the Socialist party in particular in the European election of May 2014, the result of which was yet another failure. For the first time in a nationwide election (albeit on a turnout of just over 42%) the FN emerged in first place (24.86% vote share, 24 seats out of 74 in total), with the Socialist party coming a humiliating third (13.98% vote share, 13 seats) behind the UMP (20.81% vote share, 20 seats). While the Socialists lost only one seat (down from 14 in the equivalent contest in 2009), in terms of vote share this was the worst result ever by the party in a European election. Moreover, the low score of the Socialists was not compensated by gains made by other forces of the Left. The EELV's vote share (8.95%) was massively down from 2009 (16.28%), with the party winning only six seats (down from 14 in 2009).

While it is not wholly unexpected for a governing party to be punished by voters in mid-term elections, the scale of the electoral disaffection in the 2014 municipal and European contests still came as a blow to the Socialists. These were not just defeats for the party, abandoned by many of its core voters, but a humiliating rebuff for the president and his government. By far the more important of the two defeats was the municipal election. The hugely important sub-national stratum of councillors and mayors that Hollande had helped to build up during his period as first secretary of the party was destroyed in many parts of France as whole networks of party loyalists were evicted from their posts. Moreover, despite the regional reform introduced in 2014, whereby the number of metropolitan regions has been reduced from 22 to 13, the regional elections at the end of 2015 will in all likelihood also see some Socialist losses, if for no other reason

than the Left did very well in the previous contest in 2010, winning control of 21 metropolitan regions.

Conclusion

Published at the start of 2014, a book on Hollande by the journalist Cécile Amar was entitled *Jusqu'ici tout va mal* (Amar 2014). Even Hollande could scarcely have disagreed with that negative assessment of his first eighteen months at the Elysée. With the possible exception of the military intervention in Mali and the outcome (but not the process) of the gay marriage reform, just about everything else had indeed gone badly for the president. Two years into his presidency 86% of voters judged his presidential record to be negative; 65% of his own first-round voters in 2012 thought likewise (CSA 2014). The front-page editorial in *Le Monde* of 1 May 2014 summed up his situation as follows:

[François Hollande] paie au prix fort deux ans d'hésitations, de louvoiements, d'exercice incertain de son autorité et, par-dessus tout, d'absence de résultats convaincants sur le front du redressement économique et de la baisse du chômage. Une partie de son camp n'hésite plus, désormais, à le contester, voire à le défier.

While some of Hollande's difficulties could be attributed to bad luck and a very difficult economic context, there was also a strong sense of misplaced optimism by Hollande at the start of his presidential term. In the initial months of his presidency he appears to have believed that growth would return almost automatically as part of the economic cycle and that this would in turn allow unemployment to fall. In so doing he underestimated the structural weaknesses of the French economy.

The 2014 relaunch was an attempt to transform Hollande from a Micawberish figure, waiting for something to turn up, into Action Man. Will the transformation be successful? Can Hollande recover from his first two years of unpopularity? Can he successfully restore his battered presidential image to the extent that he might be successfully re-elected in 2017? In large part Hollande's fortunes depend on an improvement in France's economic performance, over which he and his government have little autonomous control. They are reliant on a significant upturn in growth, of which as yet there are no strong signs, and on the willingness of French companies to take on more workers, which

will come only when their margins for investment have been assured and there is an increase in consumer demand. France's regulated labour market helps to protect workers in times of downturn, but also means that firms and businesses can be slower than many EU competitors in responding to new opportunities if and when these arise (Védrine 2014). In the eyes of business critics, the European Commission and the German chancellor, long-standing structural problems in the French labour market have still to be satisfactorily tackled by Hollande. In short, economic growth may be low and slow to produce much impact, with the result that unemployment may not go down by much (if at all) over the period of his presidential term.

In political terms Hollande benefits from the structural supports of the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic, which make it virtually impossible to get rid of a sitting president. Moreover, there are few obvious rivals to Hollande for the Socialist nomination in 2017: Strauss-Kahn is definitively out of the game; Royal's defeat in 2007 and her low score in the 2011 primary (6.95% in the first round) have reduced to zero her credibility as a possible presidential candidate; Fabius is not sufficiently popular with voters, will be 70 by April 2017 and in any case no longer seems interested; and so far Aubry has concentrated on local politics in her mayoral fiefdom of Lille. At present only Valls seems a possible, though still unlikely, internal opponent (and he will know that no politician in the history of the Fifth Republic has gone directly from occupying the premiership to winning the presidency, while three have failed in the attempt: Chirac in 1988, Edouard Balladur in 1995 and Jospin in 2002.).

Unsurprisingly Valls has dismissed any speculation that he might run against Hollande in a Socialist primary. In any case, as prime minister, Valls will be implicated in any record of governmental failure over the coming months. It will be much more difficult for him to pursue the 'outsider' strategy followed by Sarkozy in his challenge to Chirac during the latter's second presidential term, whereby Sarkozy managed to fight a campaign in the 2007 presidential election as though he had not been a member of the government since 2002 (Kuhn 2007). In short, Hollande's unpopularity with Socialist party members and core voters is not sufficient to undermine a second presidential candidacy unless another credible Socialist candidate is prepared to stand against him or Hollande throws in the towel. Neither is an impossible scenario, but both seem improbable.

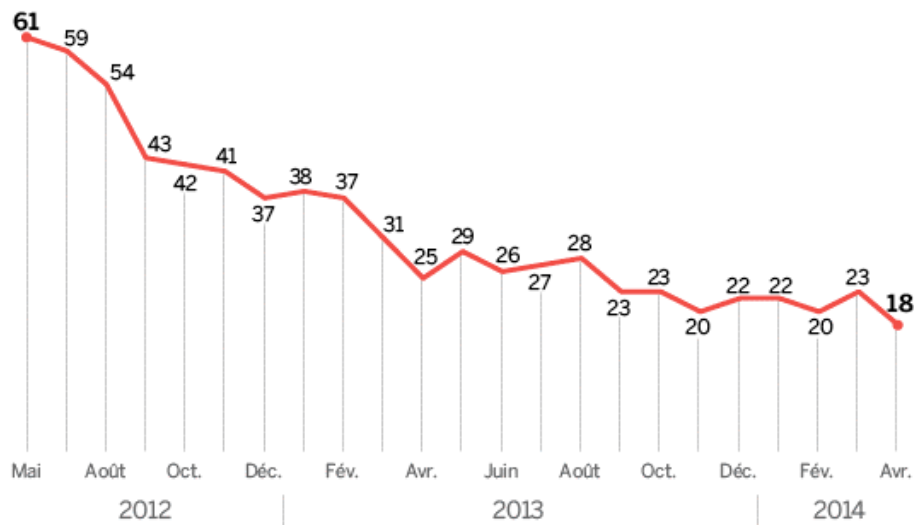
Hollande emerged from the 2014 mid-term elections, therefore, seriously weakened,


but not fatally wounded. An unanticipated bonus for him has come from the internal strife and scandals that since the defeat of Sarkozy have crippled the capacity of the UMP to present itself as a credible alternative. Hollande will hope that the mainstream Right continues to tear itself apart and fails to re-establish its credentials as a party of government (see article by Andrew Knapp). Hollande would certainly fancy his chances of re-election if the second round run-off in 2017 were between Marine Le Pen and himself. Moreover, Hollande may take some comfort from the fact that a candidate can go on to win the presidency on the back of a mediocre first round score: in 2002 Chirac obtained a vote share of 19.9% (13.75% of registered voters) in the first ballot before going on to crush Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round.

In short, Hollande will hope that what goes down can come back up. But in the words of opinion poll consultants: ‘on monte par l’escalier et on descend par l’ascenseur’ (*Le Plus* 2013). Rebuilding his popularity with voters will be a hard slog. Moreover, Hollande will need no reminding that no directly elected president of the Fifth Republic has ever successfully stood for a second term without an intervening period of executive cohabitation (Mitterrand 1986–88; Chirac 1997–2002). In terms of his presidential leadership, there is room for considerable improvement if Hollande is to imitate Mitterrand in winning a second term. After just over two years in office, he seems more likely to emulate either Giscard d’Estaing (as a one-term president) or even Jospin (as a Socialist candidate who fails to make it to the second round).

Table 1: Hollande’s popularity: May 2012–April 2014

Total des personnes satisfaites de François Hollande



Source : Enquête réalisée par téléphone sur un échantillon de 1 800 personnes, représentatif de la population française âgée de 18 ans et plus.  LeMonde.fr/lesdecodeurs

Source: IFOP poll, *Le Monde*, 7 May 2014.

Notes

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