

The French presidency under Nicolas Sarkozy

Robert Elgie

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Introduction

Nicolas Sarkozy was President of France from 2007-2012. During this time, he was often labeled the 'hyperactive president'. His time in office was characterised as the 'fast' presidency (Cole, 2012), implying a president who was so active that attention was rarely focused on any particular issue for very long. He was perhaps the most media-savvy president of the Fifth Republic (Delporte, 2012). He was interpreted as a 'bonapartist' president, emphasizing his populist and, arguably, authoritarian tendencies (Hewlett, 2011). He was certainly the most ostentatious of post-war presidents, with his detractors labeling him as the 'bling-bling' president for his sometimes-lavish lifestyle choices. Indeed, Sarkozy's personal style and his mode of governing became an issue in the 2012 presidential election campaign. In the televised debate that took place between the two rounds of the election and that pitted Sarkozy against his Socialist rival, François Hollande, the challenger spent a considerable amount of time criticizing Sarkozy's presidential style and reinforcing his own credentials as a 'normal' candidate. The fact that Hollande felt he had something to gain electorally by presenting himself in this way is a sign of how entrenched the highly personalized image of the Sarkozy presidency had become.

This chapter places the Sarkozy presidency in the context of presidential leadership since 1958 and reflects on the early months of the Hollande presidency. The main argument is that Sarkozy was able to operate a form of personalized governance because the institutions of the Fifth Republic encourage presidential leadership (Gaffney, 2012). However, it is important not to caricature either Sarkozy himself or his governing style. Many of the criticisms of the president's ostentatious lifestyle date from the early period of his presidency.

Thereafter, he was careful to tone down the public manifestations of personal excess. Moreover, when he came to power he practiced a policy of political 'ouverture' (opening up), whereby the presidential majority was extended to include both centrists and former socialists. In addition, in 2008 Sarkozy was the driving force behind constitutional reforms that aimed to increase the powers of parliament and decrease the powers of the presidency. Thus, the images of Sarkozy as some sort of republican Croesus in his personal life and as an inveterate aggrandizer of personalized power in his political life need to be tempered somewhat. Even so, there is usually some truth to all myths. The Fifth Republic places the president at the centre of the political process and the system was undoubtedly presidentialized under Sarkozy. For his part, President Hollande has adopted a very different, much more restrained governing style. To date, though, the message seems to be that even if the French rejected the bling-bling president, they have not taken the 'normal' president fully to their hearts either.

The presidency under the Fifth Republic

The Constitution of the Fifth Republic created a dual executive, one in which both the president and the prime minister are important political actors (Elgie, 2003). A literal reading of the text might suggest that there is a system of prime ministerial government. Article 20 states that the government decides and directs the policy of the nation and that it has the administration and the armed forces at its disposal. Moreover, Article 21 states that the prime minister is in general charge of the government's work and is responsible for national defence and for the implementation of laws. Thus, the prime minister is placed at the head of a government, which is charged with the day-to-day realization and implementation of public policy. That said, the 1958 constitution also provides a basis for presidential leadership. For example, Article 8 states that the president appoints the Prime Minister. If the political conditions are right, and they usually are, the president will appoint a loyal or at least subordinate prime minister, thus giving the president an indirect influence over the system a whole by way of the head of government. In addition, the president has particular responsibilities in

foreign and defense policy. Article 52 states that the president is responsible for negotiating and ratifying international treaties. Also, Article 15 states that the president is the head of the armed forces. Even though the prime minister is responsible for national defense, the president's finger is on the nuclear button. Overall, while the Constitution of the Fifth Republic created a system in which both the president and the prime minister are important political actors, in practice the president, through the prime minister, is usually in control.

The 1958 constitution ensured that president would be a significant constitutional figure. However, the 1962 constitutional reform that introduced the direct election of the president ensured that thereafter the president would be the dominant political actor within the executive. The introduction of the direct election of the president changed the dynamic of the system in two ways. Firstly, it provided the president with a direct link to the people. The president is elected by a two-ballot majority system, which means that the successful candidate will, necessarily, have won more than 50 per cent of the votes cast. For this reason, the president can justifiably claim to be speaking on behalf of France. This gives the president an authority that no other actor in the system can hope to equal. Secondly, to win the election candidates put forward policy programmes. Once elected, the new president expects to implement his/her programme. In this way, the presidential election sets the policy agenda for the country. The prime minister heads a government that decides and directs the policy of the nation, but the policies are those identified by the successful candidate at the presidential election.

That said, the direct election of the president is a necessary but not a sufficient political condition for presidential leadership. The prime minister is accountable to the National Assembly and most legislation must be passed through parliament. Thus, the parliamentary majority remains key to the functioning of the system. In December 2000 a constitutional reform reduced the president's term of office from seven to five years, the same as the term for the National Assembly. The electoral calendar was also adjusted such that the presidential election now takes place a few weeks prior to the legislative election. The de facto synchronization of the presidential and legislative terms means that there is a very strong likelihood that any new president will also enjoy majority

support in the legislature for the full term of his/her office. In other words, even though the 2000 constitutional reform gave the presidency no new powers, it made the president a more powerful political actor by increasing the likelihood that the parliamentary majority would support the president for the full presidential term. However, the introduction of the so-called *quinquennat* also increased the pace of political life. Presidents now have less time to implement their campaign promises.

In May 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy was elected as president. In June 2007 his UMP party won an overall majority in the legislature. Thus, the constitutional and political conditions were set for a period of presidential leadership. In this regard, President Sarkozy did not disappoint.

The presidency after the 2008 constitutional reform

The presidential election sets the policy agenda for the next five years. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy's programme was called 'Ensemble tout devient possible' ('Together, anything is possible'). In this document, Sarkozy committed himself to a series of constitutional reforms. In relation to the presidency, he promised a two-term presidential limit. He also promised to increase the role of parliament in relation to the president. In particular, he promised to ensure that parliament would have the right to hold hearings for nominees to state-sector posts, including presidential nominees. The aim was to send out the message that he would not be an all-powerful president and that he would reinforce the system of checks and balances. True to his word, once elected the necessary constitutional amendments were prepared. The result was a wide-ranging set of proposals that affected more than 20 Articles of the 1958 Constitution. The reforms were passed by just one vote in a special parliamentary congress in July 2008.

The reforms included the specific promises that Sarkozy had made at the presidential election the previous year. Like the US president, the French president can now serve only two consecutive terms. Similar to the US system, parliament now also has the right to veto presidential nominations. The president's right to exercise emergency powers under Article 16 was also limited

somewhat. If the president assumes emergency powers when there is a serious and immediate threat to the country, parliament now has the right after 30 days to ask the Constitutional Council to rule on whether the threat is still present. In addition, by convention, a member of the opposition now chairs the important Finance Committee in the National Assembly. In these respects, the president could claim to have kept his electoral promise. The president's powers were reduced. However, the situation is not quite as neat as this story might seem to imply. For example, while parliament can veto presidential nominations, the constitutional reform states that there has to be a three-fifths majority in the parliamentary commission for the veto to be automatic. In effect, this means that the ruling party has to agree to the veto. The ruling party is unlikely to vote against the president very frequently. Therefore, the president's nominees are unlikely to be blocked. Moreover, while the use of Article 16 in 1961 was certainly controversial and candidates at successive presidential elections have campaigned to limit it, it is a very exceptional measure. Indeed, it has been invoked only once in the history of the Fifth Republic. Therefore, even though the president's potential abuse of emergency powers has been limited, this reform will not make a difference to day-to-day governance. By contrast, the reforms actually introduced a new presidential power. Article 18 now allows the president to call a parliamentary congress and to deliver a declaration there. Previously, the president could only have a message read out in parliament. Now, though, the president may convene parliament and make a personal declaration, setting the parliamentary agenda and lobbying in favour of particular reforms. In June 2009 President Sarkozy invoked this article for the first time. He made a wide-ranging declaration covering a series of highly contested political issues. There was only a brief debate afterwards, but the president had made his point. In sum, even though Sarkozy could justifiably claim that, as promised, he had passed constitutional reforms limiting the powers of the president, arguably the president emerged from the changes no less powerful in practice. In fact, there is a case to be made that the president is actually more powerful now than previously.

The same story can be told about the way in which the reforms aimed to increase the powers of parliament. In total, no fewer than 10 Articles relating to

the government's relationship with parliament were amended. For example, the role of parliamentary committees was increased. The committees debate legislation proposed by the government and they routinely amend the legislation they receive. Previously, though, the government could ignore a committee's amendments when the bill was debated in the chamber as a whole. Now, for most legislation the chamber debates the bill as it was amended by the parliamentary committee. Therefore, the committees have more opportunity to shape the wording of legislation than before. In addition, each chamber of parliament now has more control over its own order of business. Previously, the government determined the order of business in each chamber. Therefore, parliament had to debate what the government wanted. Now, each chamber has more opportunity to set its own priorities in this regard. Overall, President Sarkozy could reasonably claim that he had kept another of his election promises and that the system included more checks and balances than before.

Once again, though, the story is a little more complex than it first appears (François, 2009). In practice, the reforms have strengthened the position of the parliamentary majority rather than parliament as a whole. For instance, the parliamentary majority enjoys not merely, by definition, a majority in the chamber as a whole, but also a majority in parliamentary committees. Therefore, even though the chamber now debates the bill as amended by the committee, in practice the chamber is debating the bill as amended by the representatives of majority in the committee. Typically, though, the majority looks to the president for leadership. Indeed, in France it is common to talk of the 'presidential majority', rather than the parliamentary majority as if it were separate from the president. If the constitutional reforms have the effect of increasing the role of the presidential majority, then the main loser from the reform process is not the president but the prime minister (Pierre-Caps, 2009). Undoubtedly the government's powers in relation to parliament have decreased, but this is not necessarily the case for the president's powers. To the extent that the head of the parliamentary majority and the majority itself is loyal to the president, then the constitutional changes may even have strengthened the president's control over the parliamentary process. Overall, therefore, the extent to which the 2008 reforms increased the role of parliament should not be overestimated (Benetti

and Sutter, 2009, p. 377). Instead, they emphasized the importance of the relationship between the president, the president's party, and the majority in parliament generally. This is the topic to which we now turn.

The president, the party and the parliamentary majority

The 1958 Constitution provides the president with a basis for political leadership, the direct election of the president provides the incumbent with a personal legitimacy and the country with a policy agenda, the legislative election provides a majority for the passage of the president's policy programme in parliament. In June 2007 the legislative election returned an overall majority for President Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party. In the National Assembly, the UMP parliamentary group comprised 320 deputies. There are 577 seats in the chamber as a whole. Therefore, the UMP could have governed alone. However, the president chose to implement a policy of 'ouverture' (or opening up). Most notably, the new government, which was headed by UMP Prime Minister François Fillon, included members of the New Centre (NC) party. The NC was separate from the UMP in parliament with 23 deputies. Therefore, the government was technically an oversized coalition government. In addition, the government included individuals who were not associated with the UMP. For example, there were three left-wing figures, the most high profile of whom, Bernard Kouchner, a member of the Socialist party (PS), was appointed as Foreign Minister. (The PS duly expelled him from the party). The government also included Jean-Louis Borloo. He was the leader of the small Radical party. The Radicals were then part of the UMP, but they maintained their own organisation. They were a party within a party. Overall, the government was a nice demonstration of the notion of a presidential majority. The president could have relied solely on the UMP for a majority in the National Assembly. However, having been elected by virtue of winning the support of people from beyond merely his own party, the new government reflected the diversity of the president's winning coalition.

The formation of a government of 'ouverture' was a public sign that President Sarkozy was not simply a party president, but that he was president of

France more broadly. Over time, though, this image of the president, if it was ever credible, began to fade. In November 2010, the policy of 'ouverture' was seriously compromised. Notably, the representatives of NC left the government, leaving the UMP as the only party represented there. Jean-Louis Borloo also left the government. Both Borloo and Hervé Morin, the leader of NC, harboured presidential ambitions, though Borloo also sported prime ministerial ambitions and was disillusioned when Fillon was reappointed following a government reshuffle. In the run-up to the 2012 election, they wanted to give themselves the opportunity to be able to criticize the president. In the end, neither stood at the 2012 election, but their ambitions meant that they had to leave office. In addition, Bernard Kouchner stepped down as Foreign Minister. In return, Frédéric Mitterrand, nephew of the former president, did join the government. Unlike his uncle, he was not a socialist, but President Sarkozy could at least claim that he had appointed a figure from 'civil society'. Moreover, the president also tempted one of the senior figures from the MoDem party to join the government. This was a blow to the party's leader, François Bayrou, who made no attempt to hide his own presidential ambitions and who did stand at the 2012 election. Overall, though, in contrast to the government formed in 2007, the government that was in place following the November 2010 reshuffle was very much a partisan administration dominated by the UMP.

President Sarkozy's attempts to portray himself as someone who was above party politics, or at least as someone who represented a broad range of party political opinions was also questioned right from the beginning of his administration by virtue of his very close relations with the UMP party. All presidents need the support of a well-organized party machine to be elected. True, they need to build a coalition beyond the confines of their own party, but the party provides the bedrock of their support. François Mitterrand was the leader of the PS. Jacques Chirac was the long-time leader of the Gaullist party. Nicolas Sarkozy himself was the president of the UMP prior to the 2007 election. Moreover, in office presidents cannot ignore the party, precisely because the party is the transmission mechanism for the passage of their policy programme in the legislature. For example, President Mitterrand regularly held breakfast meetings with senior PS representatives. Even though presidents cannot ignore

their own party, President Sarkozy was far more involved in party management than any other president of the Fifth Republic. He, too, had regular breakfast meetings with representatives of the parliamentary majority at the official presidential residence, the Elysée Palace. In contrast to his predecessors, though, President Sarkozy also chose to meet regularly with UMP deputies and senators at the Elysée. The president would often give a speech at these meetings, praising party representatives for their decisions or cajoling them into action. That the official residency of the presidency was used so regularly for internal party meetings was a first under the Fifth Republic. Indeed, at the 2012 presidential election, François Hollande criticized Sarkozy during their second-round debate for holding such meetings and said that he would not operate in such a partisan way.

In fact, the president's involvement in party affairs went far beyond holding meetings at the Elysée. He was intimately involved in the minutiae of party business. He worked closely with Jean-François Copé, the leader of the UMP group in the National Assembly from 2007-2010 and the party General Secretary from 2010 onwards. One of the reasons why the president was so involved in party business was that there were tensions both within the UMP and between the UMP parliamentary group and the government. In particular, the relationship between Copé and Prime Minister Fillon was sometimes very difficult as the UMP group sought to wield its new-found parliamentary powers against the government. Indeed, there were occasions when Copé even appeared to want to distance himself publicly from the president too. Given these tensions, the important role of the parliamentary group, and the need for party support at the 2012 election, Sarkozy had a strong incentive to manage party business very closely. For example, the president was involved in discussions about the party's electoral decisions. He was reported to be particularly keen for one of his high-profile ministers, Rama Yade, to lead a UMP list at the 2009 European election. However, she did not want to do so and was subsequently demoted in a government reshuffle. Overall, rather like the situation with regard to the 2008 constitutional amendments, President Sarkozy claimed to be above parties. However, he associated himself consistently and publicly with the UMP and its internal debates. Indeed, he did so more systematically than any president

previously. At the 2012 election, this made it difficult for him to campaign as the president of a broad coalition. On the campaign trail, he was seen primarily as the representative of the UMP party.

Presidential-prime ministerial relations under Sarkozy and Fillon

The 1958 Constitution places the prime minister at the heart of the governmental process. The direct election of the president and the presence of a presidential majority in parliament combine to create the potential for presidential leadership, but such leadership cannot occur without the support of the prime minister. As head of government, the prime minister is responsible for implementing the president's programme, for coordinating the government's policies, and for managing the government's business in the legislature. In this role, the prime minister has to arbitrate between the conflicting demands of the various ministers. For example, when it comes to the budget, should priority be given to Education or Employment? Within Education, what priorities can be afforded? The Budget Minister and the Minister of Finance prepare the budget and hold meetings with the various spending ministers to work through these issues. However, ultimately, the prime minister has to arbitrate and reach a final decision. Thus, the prime minister is in a very privileged position. There is, though, a complication. The president is the arbiter of last resort. When the president and the prime minister work in tandem, the prime minister can be sure that the president will support the prime minister's arbitration. However, if the president is unhappy with the prime minister's decision, then the president may overturn it. More insidiously, members of the president's staff may attend arbitration meetings and try to shape the decision in the way that the president wants, undermining the prime minister's authority (Foucaud, 2010). Thus, the president needs the prime minister, but the prime minister is dependent upon and, ultimately, subordinate to the president. The relationship between the president and prime minister is fundamental to the operation of the French dual executive.

In May 2007 President Sarkozy appointed François Fillon as prime minister. Fillon was a leading member of the UMP party. He was not a long-time

Sarkozy loyalist, but he had supported Sarkozy in his efforts to win the party's nomination for the 2007 presidential election and had helped Sarkozy to draw up his campaign programme. As prime minister, Fillon served for the full five-year presidential term. This is almost unheard of under the Fifth Republic. By the time he resigned following Sarkozy's defeat at 2012 election, Fillon had become the second longest-serving prime minister since 1958. He was extremely loyal to Sarkozy during this period. On a number of occasions he 'shielded' the president from potential political trouble. For example, in December 2009 he travelled to China to help repair Sino-French relations following President Sarkozy's comments about the situation in Tibet and his decision to meet the Dalai Lama in December 2008. Even though the prime minister's popularity ratings declined fairly steadily over his five-year term, he was consistently more popular than President Sarkozy himself. His reward was a seat in a Paris constituency at the 2012 legislative election. Having been a deputy in the Le Mans area for more than 30 years, his move to Paris was controversial and stepped on many toes within the UMP party. However, it was a sign that he had successfully used his time as prime minister to consolidate his position within the party.

As with so much of the Sarkozy presidency, though, this narrative tells only one side of the story. During Fillon's time as prime minister, relations with President Sarkozy were sometimes quite strained. On a number of occasions, the president publicly overruled the prime minister. For example, in September 2009 Fillon announced that the price of the new carbon tax would be €14 per ton of CO₂. However, the presidency immediately denied that the price had been fixed and a few days later declared that it would be €17. At times, the president also seemed to be making decisions without even including the prime minister. In May 2008 and a number of times thereafter Sarkozy convened a meeting of a so-called 'septet' of ministers to discuss strategy. Officially, the prime minister said that he was unconcerned and that the meetings did not amount to a second Council of Ministers, but that they were ever held was a sign of the presidentialisation of the political process. Most controversially of all, the president's advisers were perhaps more interventionist than any of those under the Fifth Republic previously. For instance, particularly in the early years of the Fillon premiership, the president's most senior advisers regularly appeared in

the media to comment on government policy. When they did so they made it plain that they were speaking as the president's representatives. Given they were publicly stating the president's wishes, it then became very difficult for the prime minister to contradict their statements because if he did so, then it would appear as if he was challenging the president personally. The regular interventions of figures such as the president's most senior adviser, Claude Guéant, the General Secretary of the Presidency from 2007-2011, were extremely difficult for the prime minister to accept. At certain times in 2008-2009 the relationship between the prime minister, on the one hand, and both the president and the president's advisers, on the other, became almost unbearable. Politically, Fillon did not want to resign because this would have hurt his position within the party. However, he must have come close and in 2010 he certainly expected to be replaced by someone else for the remainder of the Sarkozy presidency. In the end, Fillon was indispensable enough to be reappointed as prime minister when the cabinet was reshuffled in November 2010. He was popular within the party and, notwithstanding the various slights he had experienced as prime minister, publicly he remained loyal to the president.

In one sense, the difficult coexistence between Fillon and Sarkozy was typical of prime ministerial/presidential relations in general under the Fifth Republic. The prime minister willingly acknowledged that his role was to implement the president's programme and he was happy to liken himself to the conductor of an orchestra in the way that his job was to coordinate the work of a potentially discordant set of political actors. At the same time, though, the presidency, through Sarkozy's personal interventions and through those of his advisers, was extremely interventionist during Fillon's five-year term. Fundamentally, while Fillon did say that he was a "little bit annoyed" at Sarkozy's characterization of himself as the 'boss' and the prime minister as the president's 'collaborator', he was willing to accept that the president was in charge. Strategically, Fillon calculated that in the long term he had more to lose personally by challenging the president and being forced to resign than by accepting the constant slights to his own authority. This was probably a wise move, even if it meant a certain degree of humiliation at times.

Sarkozy on the European and world stage

As noted previously, the Constitution of the Fifth Republic gives the president particular responsibilities in foreign and defense policy. In particular, Articles 15 and 52 of the 1958 Constitution combined with the precedent set by President Charles de Gaulle helped to create a so-called “reserved domain” for the presidency. More recently, European affairs have in effect been added to this domain. France remains a considerable power on the world stage with strategic interests in many parts of the globe. In Europe, the process of integration has been driven by the Franco-German alliance. Given the president’s undisputed authority within the French decision-making system in relation to foreign and European affairs and defence policy, the president inevitably becomes a prominent international figure and the success of the presidency is at least partly dependent upon how the incumbent president performs in this regard.

The substance of foreign policy and European affairs under President Sarkozy is analyzed in detail in a separate chapter. Here, the focus is merely on the president’s governing style. In this regard, there is no doubt that once again Sarkozy was a highly active president. For example, President Sarkozy was personally responsible for taking certain key decisions. He was the driving force behind the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean in July 2008, having proposed a similar organisation in his 2007 election campaign, though in the end he was disappointed with the structure of the organisation (Gillespie, 2011). There is also no doubt that Sarkozy personally took the decision in March 2009 to reintegrate France into NATO’s military command structure. He also became notorious for his ‘solo runs’, meaning that he was willing to commit France unilaterally to particular issues. For instance, in November 2007 he flew to Chad to broker an agreement for the release of seven people, including three French nationals, who had been detained in an alleged child kidnapping case there. In September 2008 when France held the presidency of the European Union, Sarkozy intervened in the conflict between Russia and Georgia. He travelled to both Moscow and Tbilisi to try to broker a ceasefire. He was successful, though the terms and the implementation of the deal were subsequently criticised (Dehousse and Menon, 2009). In January 2009 he made a high-profile visit to

Israel. In his meetings with Palestinian officials in Ramallah in the Gaza Strip, he is reported to have said that he would tell the Israeli prime minister that violence there must stop. In March 2009 Sarkozy created an ongoing diplomatic row with Mexico when, on a visit there, he declared publicly that a French citizen, Florence Cassez, should be released from the Mexican jail where she was serving a sentence for involvement in kidnappings and transferred to France. The Mexican government was annoyed at the external intervention in its internal affairs and at the implication that French justice was better than Mexican justice. The style of the Sarkozy presidency manifested itself very clearly in France's response to the rebellion against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. In terms of decision-making, Sarkozy was instrumental in organising international military support for the rebellion and the decision to commit French air support was crucial to the eventual success of the operation. At the same time, it is perhaps no coincidence that in September 2011 Sarkozy, with David Cameron, was the first foreign leader to visit Libya to support the new government there, thus personalizing the policy. (The fact that Gaddafi had enjoyed lavish hospitality at the Elysée Palace in December 2007 during his first state visit to France for 34 years was conveniently forgotten.) Generally, like all of his presidential predecessors, Sarkozy was clearly in full charge of foreign and defence policy-making, but perhaps more than any previous president except Charles de Gaulle, he was willing to associate himself personally with high-profile but sometimes controversial foreign visits.

What was true of foreign and defence policy in general, was even more true of European policy. France has often been at the forefront of European integration. For example, President Mitterrand was key to the negotiation and passage of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Even so, during the Sarkozy presidency France was more consistently at the centre of European affairs than perhaps ever before. There is a case to be made that the Sarkozy presidency reinforced the intergovernmental tendencies of the EU generally. Indeed, in a speech at Toulon in December 2011 Sarkozy identified intergovernmentalism as the way forward for the EU. Therefore, his impact at this level may be very significant and long-standing. Whatever about future developments, EU politics from 2008-2012 will be forever remembered for the relationship between Sarkozy and Angela Merkel,

the Chancellor of Germany. In one sense, the so-called 'Merkozy' partnership was forced upon both leaders. The Eurozone problems were so deep and ongoing that each successive European Council meeting and Euro Summit was a crisis event. As the most important economic power and the most significant political player in Europe, Germany and France respectively had no option but to respond jointly to events in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and elsewhere. Thus, Sarkozy and Merkel were thrust into the European limelight. However, there was also a sense that President Sarkozy in particular relished the attention. A key element of his re-election strategy was that he would be able to claim that he had been able to save Europe from ruin and that the French economy was safe in his hands. Thus, Sarkozy instrumentalized the Eurozone crisis. The more Sarkozy could associate himself with the crisis, the more benefit he could hope to obtain from a successful resolution to it or at least the capable management of it. The problem for the president, though, was that the crisis refused to go away. As the EU lurched from one crisis meeting to another and the 2012 French presidential election came ever closer, Sarkozy's strategy began to unravel. Precisely because Sarkozy had associated himself with events so closely, he had more difficulty communicating the message that the French and European economies were safe in his custody. Presidents rarely lose elections as a result of events in foreign and defence policy. However, European affairs are different. The fate of the French economy is now so intertwined with the state of the European economy and, in particular, the Eurozone region that European events have a profound effect of domestic elections in France. This was a lesson that Sarkozy, the president-candidate, was soon to learn and to his cost.

Sarkozy, the president-candidate

As noted previously, the introduction in 2000 of the *quinquennat*, the five-year presidential term, made the president a more powerful political actor by increasing the likelihood that the parliamentary majority would support the president for the full presidential term. At the same time, the *quinquennat* also reduced the duration of the political cycle (Cole, 2012). In some senses, Nicolas Sarkozy was the first president to feel the full effects of the 2000 constitutional

reform. His predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was re-elected in 2002 following the reform, but there was very little likelihood of him standing again in 2007. He was the French equivalent of US lame-duck president. As a result, even though Chirac governed with the support of a large presidential majority in the legislature, his second term in office was a quiet affair from the perspective of the presidency. Indeed, for much of the 2002-2007 period media attention was focused on the hyperactive Minister of the Interior, a certain Nicolas Sarkozy. As president, and, more specifically, as a president who had every intention of standing for re-election, Sarkozy had to work to the fast-paced rhythm of the *quinquennat's* political time (ibid.). With the ever-present status of 'president-candidate', Sarkozy had a strong incentive to be consistently in the public's mind, to control the policy process, and to manage party affairs. Viewing the Sarkozy presidency in this way helps to explain some of the interventionist behaviour that has been outlined up to this point.

The *quinquennat* provides the president with only a very limited honeymoon period at the very start of the presidency. This was particularly noticeable during the Sarkozy presidency. For example, this was the period when the bling-bling aspect of the presidency was most pronounced. More importantly, it was also the period when the president introduced some of his most controversial reforms, notably the so-called '*bouclier fiscal*', or 'taxation shield', whereby a limit was placed on the total amount of taxes to which a person could be subject. This reform, which was originally passed in 2006 but which was extended in Sarkozy's first budget in 2007, was extremely controversial because it gave the impression of disproportionately benefitting the rich. Very quickly, though, the political timetable starts to concertina. The spectre of re-election soon comes into view. For the president-candidate, everything comes to be judged by whether or not a particular policy reform, a certain foreign policy initiative, or a stage-managed television intervention will be judged favourably by voters whose support will be needed to create a second-term presidential majority. Sarkozy's highly interventionist style was at least partly due to his position as a president-candidate. He needed to intervene across the range of political issues so that during this re-election campaign he could claim to have addressed the problems that the French were facing. He

needed to keep tight control over his party so that no challengers emerged. He needed to control the flow of government information so that it was focused on his own priorities. The management of the presidency from 2007-2012 was part of a broader strategy for re-election at the 2012 presidential election.

In the end, the strategy failed. Governing is always difficult. In the context of a global and European financial crisis and major foreign policy upheavals, such as the Arab spring, governing has become more difficult still. Across Europe, incumbent leaders have been defeated. In 2012 Nicolas Sarkozy was added to this list. In some senses, he did well to come so close to being re-elected. However, in retrospect, there is a temptation to say that at least part of the blame for his defeat lies with Sarkozy himself and his governing style. In the most memorable moment of the second-round televised presidential debate, François Hollande was asked what type of president he would be if elected. For three minutes, Hollande took the opportunity to list the ways in which his presidency would be different. As President of the Republic, he said, he would not meet the members of the parliamentary majority at the Elysée; he would not classify his prime minister as a 'collaborator'; he would not try to take care of everything; he would make sure that his behaviour was exemplary at all times; and so on. Each phrase was designed to remind people of the type of president that Sarkozy had been. Remarkably, Sarkozy did not fight back. Hollande's intervention may not have won the election for him. The die was probably cast by that time. However, the phrases did resonate.

The first months of the Hollande presidency

On 6 May 2012 François Hollande was elected President of the Republic, winning 51.6 per cent of the vote at the second round of the election and defeating Nicolas Sarkozy. On 15 May President Hollande appointed Jean-Marc Ayrault as prime minister. He had been the leader of the Socialist party (PS) in the National Assembly since 1997. He was a close ally of the new president. Prime Minister Ayrault headed an imbalanced coalition that was dominated by the PS, but which also included representatives from the ecologists and the left-radicals. In June, elections to the National Assembly were held. The PS was confirmed as by

far the largest party and the coalition emerged with a comfortable majority. The seemingly ineluctable logic of the Fifth Republic had once again been confirmed. The newly elected president had the support of a solid parliamentary majority and a loyal prime minister. The conditions for presidential pre-eminence were, it seemed, fully in place.

By September 2012, though, the Hollande presidency was already coming under criticism. If there had been a honeymoon period, then it had scarcely lasted beyond the legislative elections. The president's style of governing was being seriously questioned. As we have seen, during the election campaign Hollande benefited from being the antithesis of Sarkozy. The idea of a 'normal' presidency seemed seductive. Once elected, Hollande duly implemented his vision of the office. For example, in contrast to his predecessor PM Ayrault was left to run the government. The president did not try to dominate the media. There was no slew of policy announcements. To be sure, Hollande was still a major figure on the European stage. There was no talk of 'Merkollande', but at the first European summit of his presidency at the end of June the president was clearly able to bargain with the German Chancellor and a commitment to growth and employment was forthcoming. Even so, Hollande was deliberately crafting a different style of presidency to his predecessor. The problem, though, was that while this was a winning campaign formula, in office the president was expected to govern. His hands-off strategy led to claims that he was too reactive. Gone was the hyper-president, but Hollande was giving the impression of being a mini-president. He was too hands-off. In all likelihood Hollande will have to amend his governing style and become more prominent if he wishes to stand a chance of re-election.

More profoundly, Hollande seemed out of step with the economic and political calendar. The economic crisis showed no sign of abating. To combat it, there was a real desire for change. However, Hollande's response was to adopt what seemed to be an 'it'll-be-alright-on-the-night' strategy. In a television interview at the beginning of September 2012, he reiterated his promise that unemployment would start to come down in a year's time and that the country would be on its feet in two years. This dampening of expectations was laudable, but it seemed out of tune with the economic and social situation that seemed to

be worsening rapidly. Politically, too, the president seemed out of step. As noted previously, the introduction of the five-year presidential term has speeded up the electoral calendar. The president was only at the start of his term, but he already seemed to be operating at the wrong political pace. Indeed, he seemed to realise it himself. By the end of August, he was calling for the pace of reform to be accelerated. An extraordinary session of parliament that was planned for late September was brought forward. It would be a wild exaggeration to say that time was already running out for President Hollande, but by his actions, or rather by his inaction, he was managing to give that impression.

It is far too early to reach a judgment on the Hollande presidency. There have been some early divisions within the government, notably between the socialists and the ecologists. However, this is little more than normal coalition politics. At present, there is nothing to seriously worry the president or the prime minister in this regard. There have also been some rumblings within the parliamentary majority. There is a certainly a fraction of the PS parliamentary group that does not support the European Fiscal Compact. The ecologists tend to be even more opposed to it. The fact that European issues are likely to remain at the top of the political agenda for some time means that such divisions may periodically re-emerge. However, the majority seems generally solid and Prime Minister Ayrault's experience as the leader of the PS group in the Assembly for so long is likely to serve him in good stead for the foreseeable future. In this context, it is all the more tempting to place the blame for the rather inauspicious start to the Hollande presidency at the feet of the head of state personally. He is, though, a canny political actor. He knows that in the end his presidency will be judged by tangible results. Whatever the criticisms of Sarkozy's lifestyle and his governing style, in the end he was overcome by the difficult economic conditions that he faced. Even if for very different reasons Hollande's own governing style has been questioned, his political fate will also be decided by the state of the economy. In this regard Hollande is playing a long game. The rhythm of the *quinquennat* may militate against such a strategy, but the president is not defeated just yet.

Conclusion

In France, the President of the Republic is the most important political actor in the political process. The president's power comes from a mixture of constitutional, electoral and party political sources. In 2007 President Sarkozy took office on foot of a decisive electoral victory and with the support of a large parliamentary majority. For the next five years, within the domestic political system his authority was largely unchallenged. He dominated the decision-making process either directly or indirectly. He was in full charge of his party's affairs. He was a high-profile actor on the European and world stage. And yet he was defeated in 2012. For the most part, his defeat was the function of economic and social problems the seeds of which were sown long before he came to power and which he was largely powerless to resolve during his time in office. Even so, arguably, Sarkozy was at least partly the architect of his own downfall. It is easy, too easy, to caricature Sarkozy in this regard. It should be remembered that President Giscard d'Estaing was also criticised for being too 'showy', that President de Gaulle created the template for foreign policy 'solo runs', and that President Mitterrand, in his first term at least, was keen to manage party affairs. In other words, President Sarkozy acted in ways that were very similar to his predecessors. All the same, there is little doubt that overall he pushed the boundaries of the presidency further than most. In part, this was a function of the five-year presidential term, which meant that Sarkozy was a perpetual president-candidate. This is a lesson that President Hollande is learning very quickly. However, it was mainly because of Sarkozy's personal style of governing. France has a presidentialised system, but Sarkozy is likely to go down in history as the president who tried to push the system to its limits. For his part, President Hollande perhaps went too far in the other direction in the early months of his presidency. Soon, though, the rhythm of the *quinquennat* and the exigencies of being a candidate-president are likely to reassert themselves with full force.

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