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FRANCE: A CRITICAL PLAYER IN A WEAKENED EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION: WHY FRANCE MATTERS TO THE UNITED STATES

After five stormy years, the presidency of François Hollande will end on May 7, 2017. Hollande's term has been marred by economic challenges, multiple terrorist attacks on French soil, and a European migration crisis tied to the situation in Syria and Iraq. It is also ending in a much more uncertain world, with a new U.S. president, Donald Trump, who has openly declared his skepticism, if not outright opposition, toward the European Union. Although Trump is not steadfast in his criticism, he has rebuked Europeans for not contributing enough to their own security, with many EU members falling below the 2 percent of GDP target for defense spending. Adding to the uncertainty, on the other side of the English Channel, the United Kingdom is preparing to leave the European Union after a majority of voters in the June 2016 referendum turned up in favor of "Brexit."

Despite occasional disagreements, such as over the 2003 Iraq war, France has been a central, long-established partner to the United States. Both countries are G7 members, U.N. Security Council (UNSC) permanent members, and close partners in the fight against ISIS and other terrorist organizations. With the liberal international order endangered by rising neo-isolationist sentiments, multiple security crises around the world, and challenges posed by the unequal benefits of globalization, revisionist powers such as China and Russia are ready and willing to benefit from a possible "Western retreat." The U.S., therefore, needs to build on its relationships with close allies that share the democratic values at the heart of its constitution. For reasons explained in this essay, France is one of them. As a matter of fact, France, despite some perceptions to the contrary, has been an unswerving and effective U.S. ally. It was consistent in its Ukraine policy (supporting economic sanctions on Russia), as well as its Syria policy, where it never compromised on the future of the Assad regime ("no solution should include Bashar Assad").

Interestingly, some long-standing French policy positions appear to have gained new consideration, particularly the concept of a “multi-speed Europe,”¹ where larger states such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain could play a bigger role and move ahead with more integration. For the new U.S. administration, this approach could be instrumental in building “situations of strength”² with European allies, including the U.K. but also the largest remaining EU countries that can contribute to both regional and world order. France offers the advantage of being a strong EU and NATO member, as well as a global player in the security and diplomatic fields—two qualities which should appeal to the U.S. administration. Unlike his predecessor, Trump is no fan of multilateralism, and prefers dealing with individual leaders bilaterally. By mid-2017, he will be faced with a new French president. Between the three leading figures who could make it to the final round of the presidential election, one candidate, Marine Le Pen, represents an ideology that Trump’s right-wing advisers will recognize: a nationalistic, anti-immigrant platform. The second candidate, François Fillon, is a Gaullist traditional conservative. The third, Emmanuel Macron, is a pro-European and pro-business internationalist.

This paper will briefly assess the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017) and will look at the state of France as a significant actor on the world stage and as a leading member of the European Union and the trans-Atlantic alliance. Finally, it will look at France’s domestic condition, and how it could impact Europe and the Western world, especially the United States.

THE HOLLANDE DILEMMA

François Hollande announced in December 2016 that he would not seek a second term, an unprecedented act for a sitting French president. Almost from the moment he was elected, Hollande was perceived as weak and unpopular. Before choosing not to run again, opinion polls pegged his popularity at around 10 percent, which means that he—the incumbent head of state—would not have likely made it to the final round of the 2017 presidential election.³ This remarkable unpopularity is due to a number of reasons: as a candidate in 2012, Hollande wanted to appear as “Mr. Normal,” in contrast to his grandiose and temperamental predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. Although this slogan helped him get elected, it quickly became evident that the French public was still attached to the traditional image of a president who would remain above the fray—especially when representing the country abroad. Another major image problem for Hollande was his shift in economic policy between the 2012 election campaign and early 2014. His socialist government had been elected on a fairly radical social and tax platform but quickly adopted center-right, pro-market policies. Neither approach helped relaunch the sluggish French economy in the aftermath of the 2008 debt crisis. This development deeply troubled his left-wing constituency, in essence splitting his own party.

¹ Arnaud Leparmentier, “Le retour des idées françaises dans l’Union,” *Le Monde*, March 22, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/03/22/le-retour-des-idees-francaises-dans-l-union_5098927_3232.html.

² Derek Chollet et al., “Building ‘Situations of Strength’: A national security strategy for the United States” (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, February 2017), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/fp_201702_ofc_report_web.pdf.

³ Only the two top candidates in the first round are allowed to enter the subsequent runoff.

France's slow-growth economy was also an impediment to its standing in the Franco-German equilibrium. At the height of the euro crisis, slow French growth made it difficult for Hollande to speak as an alternative voice to Angela Merkel and her ultra-rigorous Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. At the same time, Hollande proved surprisingly resilient when it came to foreign policy. "The pragmatism that can sometimes make Hollande appear spineless in domestic matters is an asset in foreign policy,"⁴ wrote a French analyst.

During the Hollande presidency, France did show some foreign policy prowess. France still maintains the world's second most extensive diplomatic network and, alongside the U.K., is one of Europe's two largest nuclear powers. France has perhaps the most experienced and best-trained military in Europe, not to mention a strong defense industry with giants like Dassault, DCNS, Safran, and Thalès. Secondly, France has a string of national champions in science and key industries, not to mention—partly thanks to the French language⁵—one of the strongest "national brands" in the world. In addition, France is a key member of NATO and of the European Union, two pillars of Europe. For a U.S. administration that has openly called for strong bilateral relations rather than multilateralism, France has the advantage of being a strong individual state with all the regal attributes, as well as a founding member of the EU. President Trump and several of his advisers have used derogatory language toward the European project, claiming it is undemocratic, elitist, and a threat to national sovereignty. Trump officials have praised Nigel Farage, the rabble-rousing former leader of the U.K. Independence Party, for being the mastermind of "Brexit."⁶ Within the White House, advisers who are knowledgeable about Europe, and France in particular, are still scarce. At the same time, the working relationship between the Pentagon and the French Defense Ministry has continued to thrive. According to both sides, exchanges between officials have been regular and close.

The key French dilemma is then obvious: on one hand, France has remained a relatively strong economic and political player in an increasingly competitive world. For the past 50 years, large French companies have performed well in international markets and the country has a remarkable number of large corporations with assets spread around the world. In the fields of energy (e.g., Total, Engie, Veolia) and aerospace (e.g., Airbus, Dassault, Safran), top French companies have nothing to envy with their U.S. competitors. And in many parts of the world, such as Africa, the Levant, and even Oceania, France is one of the key actors involved. It is worth pointing out that in some of these regions, the U.S. under Donald Trump is planning a lesser role. Maintaining strong cooperation with such a like-minded nation as France makes sense as America is trying to rally its allies and partners. On the other hand, France has domestic problems, and its role has somewhat weakened in Europe, but the 2017 presidential election could help the country regain some of its lost influence and serve again as an engine for a revamped European Union. This could only be of benefit to the European project and the trans-Atlantic alliance.

President Hollande came to the Elysée Palace with a very limited foreign policy background. He had never served in government, nor had he engaged in international affairs. When he was elected in 2012, he was the ultimate domestically-oriented French

⁴ Pierre Briançon, "Hollande unchained," *Politico*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/hollande-unchained>.

⁵ French is an official language in 29 countries, and is the sixth most spoken language today.

⁶ On November 21, 2016, Donald Trump tweeted that "many people would like to see Nigel Farage represent Great Britain as their Ambassador to the United States. He would do a great job!"

politician. His foreign policy team was built in the final stage of his presidential campaign and it took this fairly inexperienced group several months to settle in. Having started from a weak position—especially *vis-à-vis* Germany’s Angela Merkel— the Hollande presidency was overall consistent with that of previous presidents, such as Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and Jacques Chirac (1995-2007). Like his predecessors, Hollande maintained France’s nuclear deterrent capabilities and multilateral commitments, and generally espoused a belief in universal values and human rights. Hollande reiterated his “full support” for the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Under Hollande, France came closer to Algeria, which helped Paris to carry out *Opération Serval* in Mali. On relations with the Asia-Pacific, the president’s first two years in office struck an interesting balance between China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. This also led to a boom in France’s defense industry exports to countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, India, and Australia. For example, Australia purchased submarines and frigates from DCNS, while the cutting-edge French Rafale jetfighter was acquired by Egypt, India, and Qatar—all between 2012 and 2015. Hollande’s realist foreign policy is also the heir to François Mitterrand’s long presidency (1981-1995), with a well-developed sense of independence among allies such as the United States. Defense cooperation with the United Kingdom was never questioned, nor was the French commitment to pursuing a European defense policy. Finally, the use of force to defend values was reaffirmed several times, whether during the Mali military intervention (swiftly ordered by Hollande himself in 2013), or in the Syria and Ukraine crises. These actions did not attract many new followers for France among fellow EU members; this was mainly due to a lack of appeal of France’s worldview in a post-2004 enlarged EU. But waning French influence can also be attributed to its weakened economy.

Despite being Europe’s second largest economy, France’s relative strength has considerably declined within a larger and more globalized 28-nation union. Its prominence has been diluted within a much bigger entity, the European Union, which has been economically dominated by Germany for over a decade. In many ways, France under Hollande has performed better outside of Europe than inside. This is due to the vitality of its high-flying multinationals—many of whom are based in Paris, even though they are more commercially active overseas⁷ than at home. Meanwhile, the 2008 debt crisis precipitated the final stages of the French de-industrialization process. Many medium-sized industrial companies were not able to bear increasing costs (especially for labor), while political resistance to reform came from many segments of the French political scene and society.

The lack of economic reforms has generated increasing mistrust among fellow European countries. Traditional allies such as Spain and Portugal were more enthralled by British and German economic performances—as measured in higher GDP and lower unemployment than France’s—leading to diminished French influence over the EU in economic terms. In 2015, the Hollande government acknowledged that “the competitiveness of business has gradually worsened since the early 2000s, leading to a slump in the margins of companies and a fall in our export market share,” as stated in a

⁷ In 2016, France’s top 40 companies, known as the “CAC 40” registered a 75 billion euro (\$80 billion) profit, a 32.6 percent increase over the past 12 months. See Denis Cosnard, “75 milliards d’euros de profits pour les entreprises du CAC 40,” *Le Monde*, February 3, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2017/03/02/75-milliards-d-euros-de-profits-pour-le-cac-40_5087936_3234.html.

report by *France Stratégie*, a unit under the Prime Minister's Office.⁸ France's public debt burden remains exceptionally high among advanced countries, with a ratio of 57 percent of GDP. In 2017, things started to pick up again with growth rate of 1.1 percent, the fastest during Hollande's tenure,⁹ but it remains well below the EU average of 1.8 percent.¹⁰

WHAT IS LEFT TO BUILD ON THE HOLLANDE PRESIDENCY?

With low economic growth and persistently high unemployment, French society has also become more pessimistic and concerned about the viability of the nation's trajectory in a globalized world. France's social model has been under threat for several decades, including within French political and business circles. The French people are the eighth most pessimistic in the world, ranking only behind the Italians and the Spanish in Europe, according to a recent survey.¹¹ Extremely apprehensive about the negative effects of globalization, 67 percent of the French interviewed believe their country is in decline. In addition, terrorist attacks, which have killed more than 300 people within a two-year period, have shaken the country. A society under pressure with a heavy police and military presence near so many public, cultural, and official sites and buildings cannot thrive in the same way as before.

Meanwhile, although "meritocracy" is still considered a national republican treasure, the French public has been blaming the elites for decades with regard to the "unfairness" of society¹² and what many see as a decline in workers' rights. This has led to the rise of political extremes—both on the right and left. Despite both the far-right Front National (FN) and the far-left (Workers' party, Front de Gauche, Communist party, etc.) having been part of the political spectrum since the 1960s, chances are that on April 23—when the French turn to vote for the first round of the presidential election—over 50 percent of votes will be cast for extreme parties.

Should the elites take the blame? According to a recent study, elites are selfish, self-centered, self-serving, and incompetent; but in the case of France, it is the elites' oligarchic behavior that is so disturbing to the middle class.¹³ "I believe in elites, as long as they are open and renewed," stated outgoing French Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, herself the daughter of Moroccan immigrants and a very successful young politician.¹⁴ The image of the political class was particularly damaged by the recent

⁸ "National Reform Program," Office of the Prime Minister, May 2015, http://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/locale/piece-jointe/2015/05/national_reform_programme_2015-france.pdf.

⁹ The 2016 French growth rate still fell well below the EU average of 1.8 percent.

¹⁰ Hannah Murphy and Valentina Romei, "The Economy that France's next president will inherit," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/c33bafde-fe68-11e6-8d8e-a5e3738f9ae4>.

¹¹ Fabrice Nodé-Langlois, "Les Français sont les plus pessimistes face à la mondialisation," *Le Figaro*, February 6, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/2017/02/06/20002-20170206ARTFIG00002-les-francais-sont-les-plus-pessimistes-au-monde-face-a-la-mondialisation.php>.

¹² Denis Cosnard, "75 milliards d'euros de profits pour les entreprises du CAC 40."

¹³ Raphaëlle Rérolle, "Elites françaises: enquête sur un monde clos," *Le Monde*, January 5, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/01/05/elites-francaises-enquete-sur-un-monde-clos_5058258_3232.html.

¹⁴ Mattea Battaglia, "Je crois en l'élite, à condition qu'elle soit ouverte et renouvelée," *Le Monde*, January 18, 2016, http://www.lemonde.fr/education/article/2016/01/18/najat-vallaud-belkacem-je-crois-en-l-elite-a-condition-qu-elle-soit-ouverte-et-renouvelee_4848879_1473685.html.

“Penelopegate” scandal, named after the wife of François Fillon, the Republican candidate for the French presidency, who stands accused of employing his wife and two of their children with public money for several years as parliamentary assistants, despite there being no record of their actually conducting any work.

The French social model is also challenged by poorly integrated third-generation immigrants, many of whom have suffered from the lack of jobs, while some have also become religiously radicalized. This remains an Achilles heel in France, where the slogan “liberté, égalité, fraternité” does not apply to everybody. Despite many attempts by successive governments, the gap in access to employment remains high for low-educated immigrants. According to a study by the bipartisan think tank Institut Montaigne, 44 percent of French people of non-Caucasian origin have felt discrimination while looking for work. For example, Christian men are four times more likely to be contacted by a prospective employer than Muslim men (although Muslim women have better chances).¹⁵ Despite early promises, the Hollande presidency was no more successful than its predecessors in convincing residents of impoverished suburbs to embrace French identity and the values of the republic. Furthermore, the state of emergency that remains in place following the 2015 terrorist attacks has led to abuses of power by police forces.¹⁶ Some, including several candidates in the 2017 presidential election, have questioned the need for France to maintain such a strong military and foreign policy approach. Still, the majority of the French population sees the country’s international role as part of its history and identity.

FRANCE, A GLOBAL PLAYER

According to the 1958 constitution of the Fifth Republic, the French president is ultimately responsible for foreign policy and defense, which means he or she has the power to make decisions within 48 hours without parliamentary approval (unlike, say, the U.S. president or the British prime minister). France’s policies are sometimes restricted by its limited capacity to form military coalitions, but President François Hollande—like most of his predecessors—has made many important executive decisions during his tenure, including sending troops to African countries at the request of their governments, combating terrorism, hosting the Paris COP 21 climate conference, and expressing France’s views on Russia, Ukraine, Syria, and Iran.

In 2012, British experts recognized the French diplomatic service as the world’s best.¹⁷ In the eyes of the British Foreign Office, “French diplomacy is very good at a single-minded pursuit of a perception of the national interest.” As presidents, both Sarkozy and Hollande have used French diplomacy for their own political benefits, but have failed on the domestic front, which speaks in favor of a well-trained bureaucracy that serves the head of state well. While maintaining a relatively strong diplomatic presence in all continents, France under Hollande was marred by several key foreign policy initiatives, such as

¹⁵ Marie-Anne Valfort, “Discriminations religieuses à l'embauche: une réalité” (Paris, Institut Montaigne, October 2015), <http://www.institutmontaigne.org/fr/publications/discriminations-religieuses-lembauche-une-realite>.

¹⁶ In February 2017, riots took place in several French cities following the mistreatment of a young French-African man by the police.

¹⁷ Kayte Rath, “French diplomatic service is the world’s best, UK says,” *BBC*, November 8, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-20218377>.

defending a hard line in the 2015 Iran nuclear negotiations. France has also taken the lead in several military operations in Africa—including the *Opération Serval* in Mali that was mentioned above.

Mali

Hollande decided to send 4,000 French troops to Mali in order to stop Islamic militants from spreading from the north to the rest of country. This followed United Nations Security Council resolution 2085 and an official request for help by the Malian government. It also reflected a close relationship with Algeria, a strong regional force whose quiet support was essential. “France’s 2013 operation in Mali had proven to be something remarkably rare: a military intervention that was cautiously considered a success,” commented Adam Taylor in *The Washington Post*.¹⁸ *Opération Serval* also turned into a European success, as other nations joined an EU peacekeeping force from 2013. Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Britain, and Spain all provided support troops. Germany has also played a particularly strong role. Since January 2017, German troops in Mali have grown to over 1,000, including a 650-soldier contingent in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the rest within the EU Training Mission (EUTM). All in all, France’s commitment to sub-Saharan Africa has been unanimously applauded by Western allies.

Ukraine

Although the Minsk process was initiated by Germany, France added its political weight toward resolving the Ukraine crisis. On June 6, 2014, Hollande organized a meeting of Russian, Ukrainian, and German leaders in Deauville, on the margins of the 1944 landing celebrations. The so-called Normandy format is still considered an achievement of the Hollande presidency; for some time, Paris had originally managed to keep a link with Moscow at the height of the crisis. However, France supported EU sanctions against Russia from 2015 onward and relations with Moscow became lukewarm—especially when Hollande canceled the delivery of two French Mistral-class ships originally bought by Russia.¹⁹ “We do not sell military equipment to Russia, but we speak to them,” a senior French official told the author in the summer of 2015. France is also a committed member of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which was created under NATO after the Ukraine crisis of September 2014.

2015 Paris Climate Conference

One of the most visible policy successes of the French government under Hollande was the hosting of COP 21, the climate change conference that culminated in an agreement signed by close to 200 nations,²⁰ including China and the United States. It took months to prepare and orchestrate the groundbreaking deal, and the Paris conference’s working method may have paved the way to negotiate major global governance issues.²¹ This, of

¹⁸ Adam Taylor, “What Mali means to France,” *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/20/what-mali-means-to-france/?utm_term=.bb3c59085821; see also: Christopher Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa’ida in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ The two Mistral frigates were eventually purchased by the Egyptian navy in 2016.

²⁰ The election of Donald Trump may lead to a U.S. reassessment of or withdrawal from the agreement.

²¹ Thierry de Montbrial and Thomas Gomart, *Notre intérêt national* (Paris : Odile Jacob, 2017), 26-27.

course, was also the result of a bilateral agreement between the government of China and the Obama administration in the United States. But on March 28, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order initiating a withdrawal from the Paris agreement.²² It remains to be seen whether Trump's orders will fully vanquish Obama's climate change legacy.

United Nations

As a permanent member of the UNSC, France has put forward a number of resolutions, such as the 2013 proposal—along with Mexico—for P5 countries to waive their veto power in the case of mass atrocities, and the October 2013 draft resolution—with Spain—to halt the bombardment of Aleppo (which was blocked by a Russian veto).

Defense policy

On the military front, France can pride itself in having one of the best-equipped military forces in the Western world. With 1.8 percent of its GDP spent on defense, France's defense budget is still below the NATO target of 2 percent; however, as Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated in July 2016,²³ 13,000 French military personnel are presently tasked with the protection of key sites across the country, assisting the police and other agencies since the establishment of the state of emergency. Besides Mali, the French military has established a presence in several African countries (Djibouti, Côte d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Senegal) and also in the Middle East (Lebanon, as part of a U.N. peacekeeping force since 2006), as well as in the Pacific (in French Polynesia and New Caledonia). Against ISIS, France's *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier (Europe's only aircraft carrier at the moment) has been an essential part of the coalition mission in 2015-2016. However, in Syria, the French view that Bashar Assad's departure from Damascus must be a condition of any peace settlement has not prevailed.

These foreign policy achievements give France an almost stand-alone status in the EU, especially as the other nuclear power and U.N. P5 member will soon be departing the union. This position gives France a special responsibility, along with Germany, within a reshaped EU. French voters insist in various polls that France should keep its permanent U.N. Security Council seat, as well as strong diplomacy and defense within NATO.²⁴ With that in mind, the new U.S. administration, which has been sending mixed signals about Europe, will have to work with a new French president, possibly in a strengthened European role.

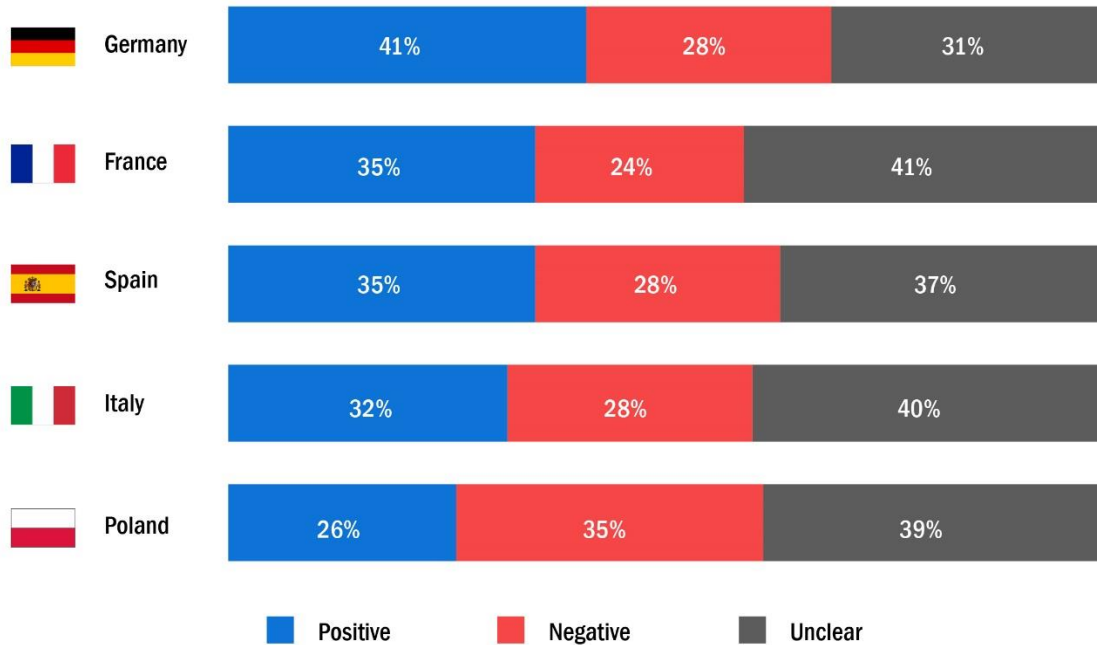
²² Coral Davenport and Alissa J. Rubin, "Trump Signs Executive Order Unwinding Obama Climate Policies," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/climate/trump-executive-order-climate-change.html?_r=1.

²³ Philippe Le Corre, "Facing threats at home, France should still engage abroad" (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, July 25, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/07/25/facing-threats-at-home-france-should-still-engage-abroad>.

²⁴ Jean-Daniel Lévy, Magalie Gérard, and Maud Hugué, "Perception des priorités de la France dans le monde" (Paris: Institut Choiseul, October 2016), <http://choiseul.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Rapport-Harris-Perceptions-des-priorit%C3%A9s-de-la-France-dans-le-monde-Institut-Choiseul.pdf>.

GRAPH 1

What kind of impact do you think Brexit would have on your country's national economy?



Source: Les Européens et le Brexit, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, October 2016

FRANCE AND THE EU: HIGH STAKES FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

France has been at the core of the European Union—along with Germany—for the past three decades. On March 28, 2017, the EU celebrated the 60th anniversary of the signing of its founding treaty in Rome. Originally, the project stemmed from a French idea: Jean Monnet's vision was to "bind up the wounds of the most bloodstained continent in modern history and turn it into a zone of peace, prosperity, democracy, and global clout, animated by common values and governed by common policies and institutions."²⁵ The European project was then driven by a close Franco-German partnership, and close relations between leaders such as Konrad Adenauer and Charles De Gaulle; Helmut Schmidt and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing; and especially Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, during and after German reunification. In many ways, this sense of closeness allowed both countries to absorb the massive impact of reunification. It also helped launch decisive projects such as the single currency, the Schengen border agreement, and the European Security and Defense Policy. A certain degree of convergence took place between the two governments, which sided together against the George W. Bush administration during the

²⁵ Strobe Talbott, "Monnet's brandy and Europe's fate," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, November 2, 2014), <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2014/monnets-brandy-and-europes-fate.html>.

Iraq crisis in 2003.²⁶ That was the time when both countries—led by Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder—saw the need for a new trans-Atlantic relationship.²⁷

The past decade has seen a new type of relationship emerging between Paris and Berlin. The two European powers are also taking on distinct roles and not necessarily presenting a united front toward the United States. After the Iraq-related trans-Atlantic dispute in the early 2000s, both capitals tried separately to rebuild close relations with Washington. On the military front, this took place in Afghanistan with both nations assuming important roles under the U.S.-led NATO coalition, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Chancellor Merkel came to power in 2005, while President Sarkozy was elected in 2007; both attempted to reconnect with President Bush during his last year in office. They also tried—with mixed results—to build a strong relationship with President Barack Obama, who was elected in 2008. Militarily, both the U.K. and France played an active role in Libya with U.S. support. Discrepancies with Germany became obvious when France took the lead to topple the Gadhafi regime in 2011, while Germany did not take part, and even abstained from voting on the U.N. Security Council resolution that authorized the use of force in the intervention.

Meanwhile, the two nations appeared even more divided on the economic front following the onset of the 2008 euro crisis. Angela Merkel's Germany behaved as the pair's senior partner in Europe's monetary and financial affairs, while France remained a global player due to its military and diplomatic outreach. Following a new definition of national interest, Chancellor Merkel turned an about-face with Germany's policy toward Russia in 2014, and worked together with France in dealing with a much more assertive Vladimir Putin. Under Chancellor Merkel, Germany became the "reluctant hegemon"²⁸ of an ever-declining EU. In the U.S., people started to acknowledge this role as Germany expressed more than once its Atlantic orientation. In Europe, Germany's heavy-handed imposition of economic rigor made some uneasy, especially in the south.

Since the beginning of the Greek financial crisis, the French government had been supportive of Athens, and François Hollande was seen as playing a constructive role. France did not want Greece to set a precedent of breaking off from the Eurozone, which could have led to major difficulties—including in France itself, where anti-European populism has been on the rise. Unlike the Germans, who were largely in favor of letting Greece leave the Eurozone, the French were in favor of restructuring Greek debt, with 55 percent of the population in support of this approach. Believing that "Grexit" was simply not an option, the French government fought to the end to ensure that Greece would remain in the Eurozone. Nevertheless, in 2015, Hollande played a leading role in supporting Greece, in effect becoming "the one constructive party."²⁹ "It is an historic decision for Greece to remain in the Eurozone. ... Greece is not only part of Europe's

²⁶ Under President Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, who belonged to different European political families (center-right for Chirac; center-left for Schröder).

²⁷ Frédéric Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis: France, the United States and Iraq, 1991-2003* (Washington/New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Columbia University Press, 2016).

²⁸ "Europe's reluctant hegemon," *The Economist*, June 15, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21579140-germany-now-dominant-country-europe-needs-rethink-way-it-sees-itself-and>.

²⁹ Martin Sandbu, "Three unedifying lessons of the Greek drama," *Financial Times*, June 13, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/04312dc0-2729-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c>.

history, it is also part of our lifestyle,” said Hollande at the time, attempting to send a message to the growing electorate of the anti-European Front National.

As Germany’s international power has been expanding (but arguably not yet to the extent of France’s global influence) many experts rank the Franco-German partnership high on the scale of stabilizing factors for the future of the Europe and the West.³⁰ As one foreign policy analyst remarked, “Germany, whose size and economic heft will require it to assume its role as Europe’s leader, can make the transition incrementally with the help of its neighbor to the west. If managed effectively, France has the ability to strengthen British, German and European prospects, while taking the pivotal role befitting its stature in Europe.”³¹ In this respect, the Hollande presidency has not succeeded in reigniting the Franco-German engine of the EU.

This missed opportunity has perhaps led to more disarray at the heart of European institutions in Brussels, where the upcoming departure of the United Kingdom in 2019 is now anxiously anticipated, especially by some of the countries who joined the EU after the 2004 enlargement. Both candidates for German Chancellor—Angela Merkel and Martin Schultz—and the favored contender for the French presidency Emmanuel Macron are leaning toward a closer, more integrated, and more efficient “core EU.” Interestingly, a November 2016 survey by the Institut Choiseul showed that 29 percent of the French people interviewed wanted French diplomacy to be closer to Germany, against Russia (18 percent), and the U.S. (17 percent).³²

TALKS OF “FREXIT” ARE HIGHLY PREMATURE

If France remains a key player in the continent and around the world, it is also because the French public believes in remaining in the EU and in the Eurozone. A majority of the French population believes that France alone cannot lead Europe, but that it can actively influence its future. Contrary to the British public, which voted in favor of leaving the EU, putting an end to a long battle between Europhiles and Euroskeptics, “Frexit” is far from a reality. The French believe they are stronger as part of a common European project. According to a major survey by the Fondation Jean Jaurès and pollster IFOP, 67 percent of the respondents are still in favor of remaining in the euro, though a substantial minority would like to return to the French franc. This marks an increase of 16 percentage points over the period of 1992-2016.³³ Leaving the European common currency would be a costly move at a time when the cautious and wary French care more about the preservation of their lifestyle and social model than some political adventure outside the EU.

³⁰ Frédéric Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis*.

³¹ Anthony Silberfeld, “A New Role for France: Europe’s Pivotal Nation” (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Foundation, August 2, 2016),

http://www.bfna.org/sites/default/files/publications/BBrief_%20A_New_Role_for_France_Europes_Pivotal_Nation.pdf.

³² Jean-Daniel Lévy et al., “Perception des priorités de la France dans le monde.”

³³ Jérôme Fourquet, “Les Européens et le Brexit” (Paris : Fondation Jean Jaurès, July 2016), <https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/notebrexit.pdf>.

**The evolution of public support for the EU project
(By social/professional category)**

	Maastricht Treaty (1992)	French European Constitution Referendum (2005)	Brexit (2016)	Percentage Change (1992-2016)
Total population	51%	45%	67%	+16 pts
Merchants/Craftsmen	43%	47%	62%	+19 pts
Professionals/Senior Executives	70%	62%	82%	+12 pts
Retired	56%	59%	81%	+25 pts
Consultants/Contractors	58%	54%	74%	+16 pts
Employees	44%	38%	45%	+1 pt
Working Class	42%	26%	47%	+5 pts

Source: Les Européens et le Brexit, IFOP/Fondation Jean-Jaurès, July 2016.

Although it is not certain that a majority of French people understand how EU institutions work, they see France as tied to the European project. People are “used to the euro and to the EU,” says political scientist Laurent Bouvet.³⁴ With so many crises going on, and major elections taking place in 2017, France cannot walk away from its European role. In 2016, 67 percent of the French across the political spectrum believed it was in their country’s interest to remain in the EU. Unsurprisingly, the least pro-EU group is made of Front National voters (only 30 percent think it is good for France to remain part of the EU, but still a 5 percent increase since 2014). During the second televised debate of the presidential campaign on April 11, centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron, in particular, attacked Le Pen on “all the lies that we hear about Europe that we could hear from your father. ... I do not want a fake debate between those who claim to stand for French people, saying ‘let’s leave Europe,’ and others who are too easy going on the EU.”³⁵

³⁴ Interview with the author, October 20, 2016.

³⁵ Romain Brunet and Alcyone Wemaere, “Présidentielle: un premier débat à 11 émaillé de passes d’armes sur l’Europe et les affaires,” *France 24*, April 4, 2017, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20170404-direct-suivez-politique-debat-liveblog-onze-candidats-presidentielle-2017>.

The evolution of French public perception of the benefits of being an EU member (By political affiliation)			
France	November 2014	June 2016	Percentage Change
Total Population	57%	67%	+10 pts
Left Front	50%	70%	+20 pts
Socialist Party	76%	85%	+9 pts
Republicans	74%	84%	+10 pts
National Front	25%	30%	+5 pts

Source: Les Européens et le Brexit, IFOP/Fondation Jean-Jaurès, July 2016.

French elites may be conscious that France is being downgraded on the European stage, but French public opinion is not. According to a survey, Europe is “the right political level” to sort out current issues, including on the economic front. The French people’s sense of belonging to a great nation is tied to what they perceive to be France’s real weight at the European level and globally. In addition, only political and perhaps business elites are aware of the obvious decline of French influence in Brussels—in particular during the Hollande presidency—with Euroskeptic Laurent Fabius at the helm of the Foreign Ministry (2012-2016). Fabius, who famously advocated against the European constitutional treaty during the 2005 referendum, spent more time as a minister promoting his “economic diplomacy” concept in China and Japan than spreading French influence in Brussels.³⁶

France’s presence in Brussels has declined despite a 2012 campaign commitment by a genuinely pro-European candidate Hollande to engage France further with the EU.³⁷ Hollande had also promised to renegotiate the EU budget with Germany—which he never did. The number of French officials within the European institutions has fallen, and French members of the European Parliament have never been so disunited, spread across no less than six parliamentary groups (none of which is chaired by a French deputy). Pierre Vimont, the respected first executive secretary-general of the European External Action Service (EEAS), who served between 2010 and 2015, has retired and was eventually replaced by a German. This diminished leadership role for France in Brussels may change depending on who is elected president on May 7, 2017.

³⁶ “The dispensable French,” *The Economist*, November 7, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21677987-france-has-less-and-less-influence-eu-and-fears-use-what-it-still-has-dispensable>.

³⁷ “François Hollande: une “nouvelle donne” pour l’Europe?” *Euractiv*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/news/francois-hollande-une-nouvelle-donne-pour-l-europe>.

THE 2017 EXTRAORDINARY ELECTIONS

Every five years, France faces a series of elections in the spring. Since 2002, the French elect their president for a 5-year term, followed by elections of the lower house of parliament (the National Assembly) a month later. In 2017, the presidential race is particularly unusual, with two major candidates coming from outside the mainstream political class, the conservative Les Républicains (LR, a party formerly known as the RPR under Jacques Chirac and later as the UMP under Sarkozy) and the Parti Socialiste (PS).

The two front-runners could hardly be more different. The 48-year old far right Front National leader Marine Le Pen has been heading the polls for the first round vote, but according to all poll projections is likely to lose in the runoff. Her agenda is utterly anti-EU, anti-immigrant, and nationalistic. The other unusual candidate is 39-year old Emmanuel Macron, a political maverick who has come a long way from his role as President Hollande's senior adviser to economy minister. Macron, who is a proud Europhile and wants to reinforce France's role at the heart of the EU, left the Hollande government in September 2016 to start an organization called *En Marche!* (literally: "On the Move!"), which by March 2017 had attracted no less than 220,000 members, a higher figure than memberships of both LR and PS. Between the fall of 2016 and April 2017, Macron has surged to rank first or second in voters' intentions.

There are many differences between these two candidates: Le Pen is the heir to FN founder and her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, while Macron is the first centrist candidate who is likely to reach the second round of the presidential race since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974. Le Pen is building her campaign on a nationalistic, anti-immigrant, anti-EU platform, whose key message can be summed up as "French people first,"³⁸ with a clear difference made between "Français de souche" (French-born) and immigrants. Le Pen has been successful in expanding her party's electoral base (she in fact calls her campaign *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* rather than FN) by reaching out to working class people, who would have previously voted for left-wing candidates. But in the eyes of many French, including the post-war generation, the FN symbolizes a nationalist, colonialist, and anti-immigrant (and historically anti-Semitic) far-right in full contradiction with French values. Although his daughter has officially tried to expel him from the party he founded in order to broaden her electoral base, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has been convicted several times for racist or anti-Semitic comments, is still the party's honorary chairman and a member of the top executive³⁹.

Meanwhile, Marine Le Pen, who herself has been a member of the European Parliament for 13 years, is calling for French withdrawal from the euro currency and renegotiation of France's membership in the European Union. This message has not yet resonated with a majority of French people, who believe their country remains stronger as part of a larger entity (although they see the need for France to keep its own nuclear deterrent, strong diplomacy, and defense capacity—independently of Europe and especially of NATO).

³⁸ In previous presidential campaigns (1974, 1988, 1995, 2002, 2007), as well as other election campaigns, Jean-Marie Le Pen's key slogan was always "Les Français d'abord" (French people first).

³⁹ On April 9, Marine Le Pen herself created outrage by stating that France was not responsible for the arrest of 13,000 Jews in 1942 in what is known as the "Vel d'Hiv roundup." See Adam Nossiter, "Le Pen denies French guilt for rounding up Jews," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/world/europe/france-marine-le-pen-jews-national-front.html>.

Emmanuel Macron, the man who will likely face Marine Le Pen in the runoff (unless François Fillon makes a comeback and reaches the final round), holds opposite views when it comes to Europe. He believes in a renewed Franco-German partnership and in a stronger, if smaller, EU. Although an Anglophile, he also takes a hard line on Brexit.⁴⁰ Most importantly, as the next president will be charged with negotiating the British exit in 2019, Macron believes in maintaining the coherence of the EU, which means not allowing a country like the U.K. to “leave and thrive.” Although both Macron and Le Pen are outside of mainstream parties, there is a massive difference in their platforms: on Europe, Macron is the “yes” man (to Europe, and to globalization), as opposed to the “no” woman Marine Le Pen, who claims to stand for the people who have not benefited from globalization.⁴¹

A former investment banker who spent some time on Wall Street before joining President Hollande as chief economic adviser and later as minister, Macron is a pro-business candidate, who wants to “transform French capitalism” in order to “unlock the economy.” Macron’s plan is to make France more competitive; he emphasizes the need to “streamline government organization, increase investment promotion, reduce red tape, and modernize our economy.” In the summer of 2015, the Macron law—a pro-business law, aimed at reducing the public deficit, increasing competitiveness, and spurring an overall modernization of the French economy—was approved by the National Assembly. The economic environment is already shaky, but the Macron measures have attempted to stimulate entrepreneurship—a move welcomed especially by a generation of educated young professionals hungry for opportunities.

There are already some positive signs that the country’s new pro-business stance is helping: more startup companies are emerging, for instance, and a spirit of entrepreneurship is spreading among young graduates. According to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, or Insee), 554,000 companies were created in France in 2016, 6 percent more than the previous year.⁴² Meanwhile, the government has launched a new entrepreneur visa for foreign investors in technology and digital innovation. These measures have served to build and expand Macron’s program, which has six pillars:

- Building a “pro-work” society
- Modernizing the economy
- Reforming schools
- Reinforcing security
- Building an international strategy
- Moralizing public life

⁴⁰ Charles Grant, “The Meaning of Macron” (London: Center for European Reform, March 20, 2017), <https://www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2017/meaning-macron>.

⁴¹ Vincent Tournier and Frédéric Dabi, “Voter Macron pour éviter Le Pen ? les clés pour comprendre le rapport de force,” *Atlantico*, March 9, 2017, <http://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/voter-macron-pour-eviter-pen-cles-pour-vraiment-comprendre-rapport-force-frederic-dabi-vincent-tournier-2985715.html>.

⁴² Insee, “Les créations d’entreprises en 2016” (Paris: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, January 2017), <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2562977>.

The economic program, based on the works of 3,000 grass-roots brainstorming sessions across France, has been drafted by former High Commissioner of France Stratégie Jean Pisani-Ferry (who stepped down in February to join Macron as chief economic adviser). It includes the end of the 35-hour working week, a 60 billion euro (\$64 billion) savings on state spending, and a 50 billion euro (\$53 billion) investment plan. Macron has also received the support of veteran centrist leader François Bayrou, once thought to be a candidate himself, and of numerous politicians from right and left, including the respected Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, the former center-right Justice Minister Dominique Perben, and the current Mayor of Lyon (PS) Gérard Collomb. It is important to note that both Le Pen and Macron have been helped by the dismayed state of the two mainstream parties, Les Républicains⁴³ and the Parti Socialiste, which alternated in power between 1981 and 2017.

Chosen above Sarkozy and another center-right ex-prime minister, Alain Juppé, Fillon was the center-right primary's indisputable winner and a man claiming to be a champion of anti-corruption. For all these reasons, Fillon was France's all-but-certain president, until the eruption of the so-called "Penelopegate" scandal in January 2017. A newspaper revealed that Fillon had employed his wife as a paid parliamentary assistant (which is not illegal) without her apparently performing any work. He had also employed two of his children in similar circumstances. This led to six stormy weeks with the Republican candidate's ratings plunging from 27 to 18 percent in the polls. On March 5, Fillon declared that "no one could prevent him to be a candidate" and that he would be on the ballot on April 23 no matter what.

Whether a turnaround can happen after the massive damage caused in the French public opinion remains to be seen, as many disoriented LR voters seemed to be turning toward either Le Pen or Macron. The result has been devastating within Fillon's electorate, although the LR candidate's team has recently become hopeful again that he could still make it to the runoff⁴⁴. With a full party organization behind him, he is certainly the one that would be most likely to win the June 2017 parliamentary elections. Fillon's views on international affairs are fairly similar to the two previous Gaullist presidents (Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy), although he is also known as a *souverainiste*, much less pro-European than Macron, for example. He would be more difficult for the German Chancellor to handle, but he might get on better with President Trump, who seems to prefer dealing with national governments rather than the EU.

In the Socialist camp, the January 2017 primary produced a surprise winner named Benoît Hamon, a little-known former party apparatchik, who had opposed François Hollande for most of his presidency (even though he served as a Socialist minister from 2012-2014). With a left-wing, high-spending agenda deemed by critics as unrealistic and which puts him to the margins of his party, Hamon has very limited hopes to make it to the runoff (especially as he will be competing with a more charismatic dissident left-wing candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of *La France insoumise* (Unbowed France), who has been performing better in many polls and could even potentially make it to the runoff). Many

⁴³ Between 1958 and 2016, the Gaullist party has changed names several times. It was the Union des Républicains (UDR), Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), and finally Les Républicains (LR).

⁴⁴ Jean-Baptiste Garat and Judith Waintraub, "Pourquoi l'espoir revient dans le camp Fillon." *Le Figaro*, April 7, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/2017/04/07/35003-20170407ARTFIG00341-un-nouveau-vent-d-optimisme-souffle-chez-les-fillonistes.php>.

assume that the majority of center-left voters—including perhaps Hollande himself in a Mitterrandian move—will turn to Macron instead.

In the constitution of the executive-oriented Fifth Republic, the president carries much weight. He or she will be able to build and implement the political agenda for the next five years. On the other hand, the power of presidents without a parliamentary majority has been considerably weakened, as the three past *cohabitations*, or divided governments (1986-1988, 1993-1995, and 1997-2002), have demonstrated. The sharing of powers between a president and a prime minister (the latter normally a subordinate appointed by the former) in such situations has not worked in favor of the French people, as the two parties fight one another instead of working together—similar to the case in Germany between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) during two of Angela Merkel’s three terms as chancellor. Instead, what France needs is a president with a clear majority in the National Assembly. What is interesting in 2017 is the emergence of a clear plan for a German-style coalition under Emmanuel Macron, who has managed to attract support from both sides of the political spectrum (although neither LR nor PS as political parties have lent their official support to him). If elected president, he will have to convince the country of his ability to form such a coalition in order to win the parliamentary elections.

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF 2017

Notwithstanding the 2017 elections, arguably the most important for the country in 50 years, France will remain a critical player in the trans-Atlantic alliance. Its role within the U.N. Security Council is not to be discounted. The size of its military and diplomacy make it one of the very few partners the U.S. can rely upon in a very chaotic world, in regions as far as the Asia Pacific, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. France is a key player in the fight against ISIS and other radical terrorist groups. Unlike Germany and other EU members, France has significant experience in Africa and the Middle East, which could prove essential to a U.S. administration willing to build “areas of influence.”⁴⁵ With the U.K.’s partial withdrawal from the world scene, entangled in its Brexit negotiations and trying to rebuild its international role, France remains an essential pillar of the European Union and of NATO. No German leadership can claim to relaunch the EU without the help of France.

This is why the 2017 elections carry so much weight: if the Front National were to win either the presidency or parliamentary elections—the latter being extremely unlikely—this would mean the end of the European Union, which would play in the hands of American critics of the EU, such as senior White House advisers Stephen Bannon and Peter Navarro. On the other hand, the election of either Fillon or Macron would not necessarily mean a stable French leadership for the next five years, as reforms (promised by both presidential candidates) may lead to strong reactions.

On the economic front, the lost decade of 2001-2011 (especially in comparison with Germany’s economic success) has been replaced by a more pro-business period. Politically, the country is clearly divided, with the Front National at its highest popularity levels since it was founded over 40 years ago. However, no projection sees the far right winning a clear political mandate to run the country. There is no trust in its economic

⁴⁵ Chollet et al., “Building ‘Situations of Strength.’”

program, but there is a real fear that the FN might wreck the European ship, 60 years after the Treaty of Rome laid the foundation of the EU.

On a more positive side, France has stronger demographic trends than almost all other EU nations. Due to its colonial past, it has also tried tackling immigration issues much earlier than its neighbors (albeit with great difficulties). With its high Muslim population, and perhaps with greater potential for integration than in countries that have been welcoming new immigrants, it could become more central to the fate of the West. It might serve, as Ross Douthat wrote, as “the crucible of Europe.”⁴⁶

Despite political uncertainties, France also remains an indispensable world player. In a less unified European Union, it could well be a crucial partner to the United States in stabilizing failed states and constraining revisionist powers such as Russia and China, in the context of what will probably be a two-speed Europe (both presidential candidates Macron and Fillon are defending the idea of a “core Europe”). With Germany, France will remain a partner of choice for the U.S. and is one of the few nations that can deliver on Donald Trump’s aspiration for a new world order built upon bilateral relations.

⁴⁶ Ross Douthat, “France, the crucible of Europe,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-france-the-crucible-of-europe.html?_r=0.

APPENDIX

KEY ELECTIONS AND RESULTS

- 1965 Charles de Gaulle (RPF) v. François Mitterrand (PS): *De Gaulle elected.*
- 1969 Georges Pompidou (RPF) v. Gaston Defferre (PS): *Pompidou elected.*
- 1974 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (RI) v. François Mitterrand (PS): *Giscard elected.*
- 1981 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (RI) v. François Mitterrand (PS): *Mitterrand elected.*
- 1986 Parliamentary elections won by RPR: *cohabitation.*
- 1988 François Mitterrand (PS) v. Jacques Chirac (RPR): *Mitterrand re-elected.*
- 1993 Parliamentary elections won by RPR: *cohabitation.*
- 1995 Jacques Chirac (RPR) v. Lionel Jospin (PS): *Chirac elected.*
- 1997 Parliamentary elections won by PS: *cohabitation.*
- 2002 Jacques Chirac (RPR) v. Jean-Marie Le Pen (FN): *Chirac re-elected.*
- 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP) v. Ségolène Royal (PS): *Sarkozy elected.*
- 2012 Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP) v. François Hollande (PS): *Hollande elected.*