

FRENCH ELECTIONS – THE IMPACT OF THE VOTES

*HE Francis Etienne**

These are the Ambassador's notes of the lecture given 18 June 2012 at Victoria University of Wellington. The lecture was introduced by Ms Fiona Barker of the School of History Philosophy Political Science and International Relations, of the Victoria University of Wellington.

On the 10th and 17th of June 2012, the French people elected their national representatives, the députés or the MPs of the Lower House, known in France as the Assemblée nationale. Six weeks after the presidential election, and on the day the results of the legislative elections were gathered, this lecture by the French Ambassador, was aimed at commenting on the initial results, the trends shown by those results, and the consequences of the ballot. The Ambassador devoted some time to explaining, in a two-stage analysis, first the current context and then the background to the elections in France. He then described the meaning of the results from various perspectives, and engaged in a question and answer session with the audience.

Six semaines après l'élection du Président de la République française, les électeurs français se sont une nouvelle fois, rendus aux urnes les 10 et 17 juin 2012 pour procéder au renouvellement des membres de l'Assemblée nationale.

Le 18 juin 2012, M Francis Etienne, Ambassadeur de France en Nouvelle-Zélande, sur invitation du Dr Fiona Barker (School of History Philosophy Political Science and International Relations Programme de Victoria University of Wellington), a présenté et commenté les premiers résultats connus devant un auditoire composé principalement de membres du corps diplomatique en poste en Nouvelle-Zélande, d'universitaires et de hauts fonctionnaires néo-zélandais. Les points évoqués lors de cette conférence et les commentaires de l'auditoire sont reproduits sous forme synthétique.

* Ambassador of France in New Zealand.

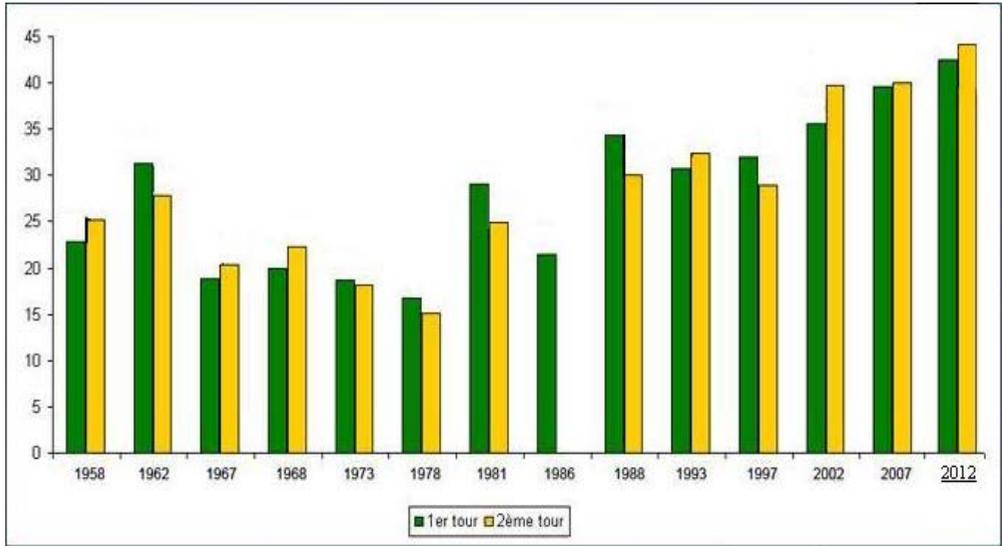
"Il n'y a pas de crête sans vent" – Proverbe africain.

The first interesting point about the French *Assemblée Nationale* is that it is the Lower House of the Parliament. There is another House, the Upper House, otherwise referred to as the Senate. The Parliament, which forms the legislative part of the State's power, drafts the budget, makes laws (including amending Bills through consultation with the Senate using a "shuttle system") and controls the Government (a political responsibility). It is interesting to note that reciprocally, the President of the Republic can dissolve the Assembly (but if that is done, and whatever the result of the next elections, the President cannot dissolve it again for the next 12 months).

The Members of the Assembly, the MPs, are elected for 5 years through a two-round ballot. There are 577 seats, but this year, for the first time, eleven MPs were elected overseas, to represent the French citizens living abroad (more than 2.2 million people today). All French citizens over 18 are eligible to vote and to stand for election. The rules are many, but are quite easy to understand. After the first round, if a candidate has received more than 50% of the recorded votes he is elected, but this is quite rare (36 MPs this year). Otherwise, the second round is open to all candidates who received more than 12.5% of the registered voters. It is for this reason that in more than 90 constituencies, there were second rounds with three candidates. The procedure for the second round is simple: the candidate who receives the most votes is elected.

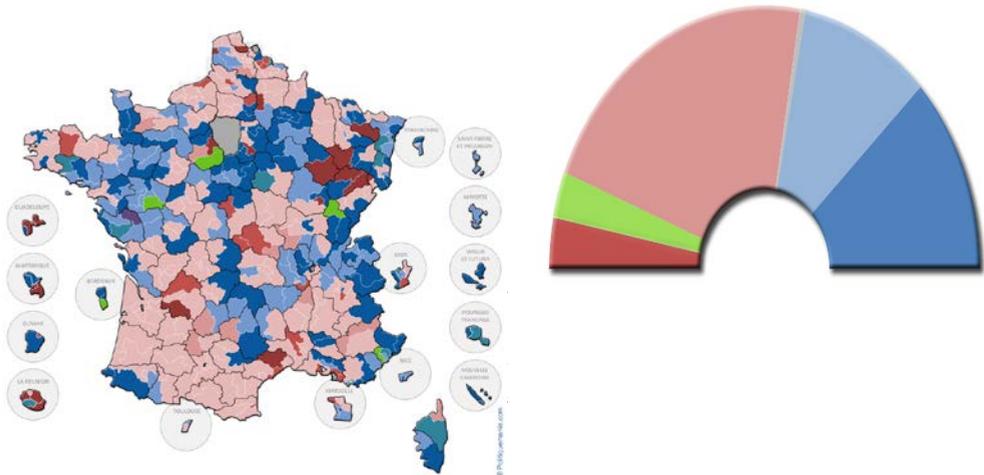
Notably, many French people attended the lecture, which is why the Ambassador explained precisely what the new constituencies are for French citizens living overseas. Created by the 2010 division of districts, the world has been divided into eleven constituencies, each covering an area in which approximately ($\pm 20\%$) 100,000 French people live. The system already existed in the Senate, where 12 MPs have been elected specifically by citizens overseas since the beginning of the fifth republic, before 1948. Interestingly, New Zealand is part of the biggest constituency ever, because there is just one MP elected for the whole area between Ukraine and New Zealand, which includes Australia, China, India and Russia. But, in order to vote, citizens living abroad often have to travel a long way. Thus, to prevent abstention, these voters were for the first time in 2012 authorised and able to vote electronically. The Ambassador highlighted that in New Zealand two thirds of the votes were made by internet!

But despite this, and although participation is traditionally lower for the legislative elections than for the presidential election, the ballot of the 17 June saw the highest abstention rate since 1958 – 44.3 % of people did not vote.

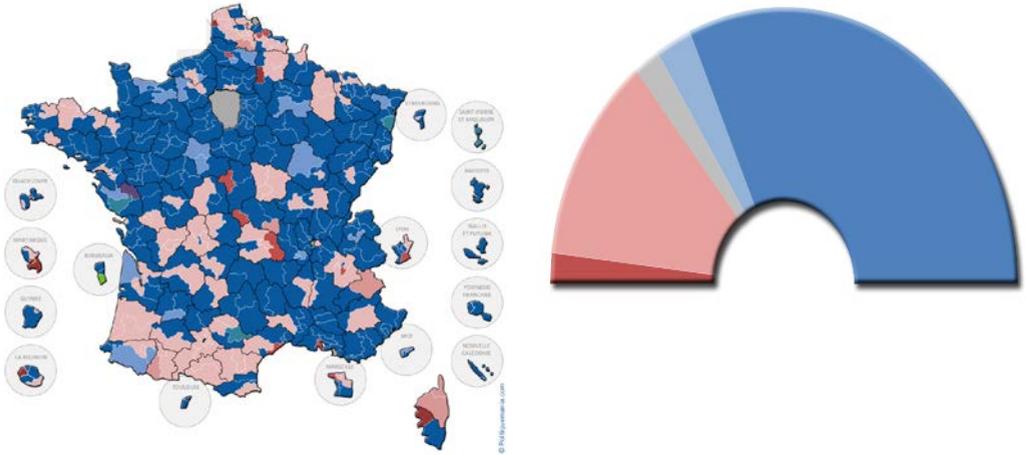


As this graph shows, the abstention rate was the highest of the Fifth Republic for the first round. But ironically, the record has quickly been overcome. The number of non-voters is an important piece of data, and could show a global trend of fatalism as much as it shows a need to modernise logistical procedures for voting. The electronic vote could become an easier way to vote, and could thus help to prevent such abstention rates in the future.

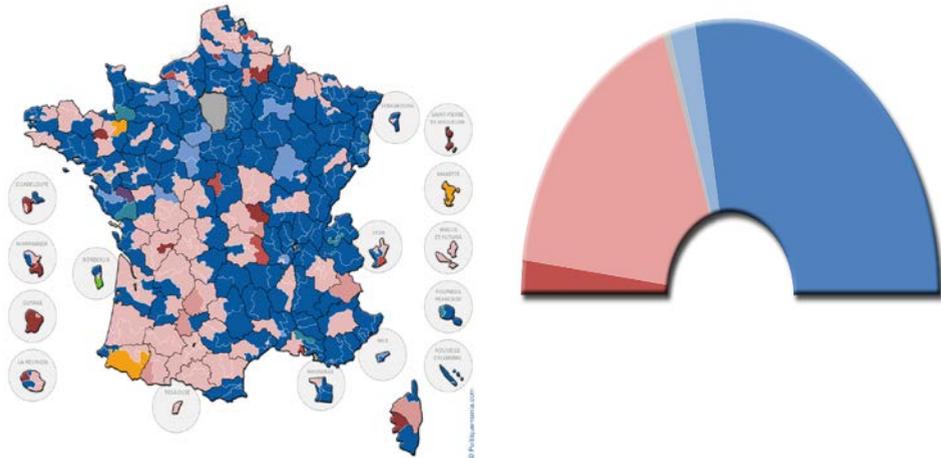
Results in 1997:



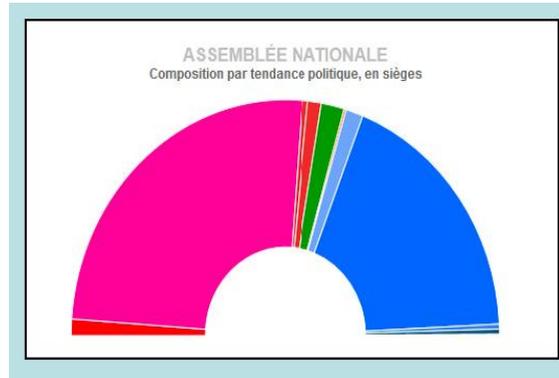
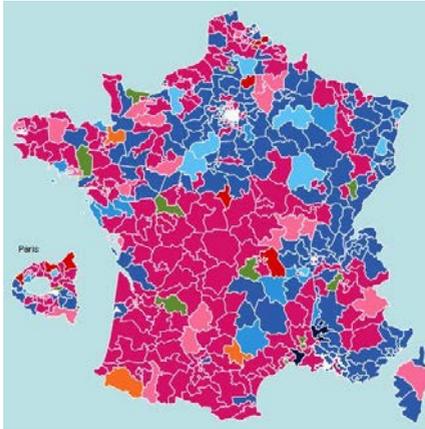
Results in 2002:



Results in 2007:



As evidenced by these charts, there is an indication of a rejection trend, which strikes the ruling party sometimes quite strongly.



Some statistics must be highlighted. First, for an Assembly of 577 seats, the absolute majority is 289 MPs. The "*Parti Socialiste*" and its closest allies won 291 seats, meaning that the absolute majority is held by only one political group. In this way, the Parti Socialiste will not have to negotiate with the far-left or the center to pass a law. Furthermore, the majority in the Assemblée Nationale, a coalition of left and center-left parties holds 52 more seats, for a total of 341 MPs: 59 % of the Lower House now belongs to the highest left majority since 1981. An initial interpretation of this might be a strong will of change. Where does this will come from?

There are many factors. Firstly, the economic context. Between the financial crisis, weak growth prospects, and high unemployment, people are looking for hope. This trend became François Hollande's leitmotiv, as shown by his campaign slogan, "Change, it is now". Secondly, and as noted above, during this Presidential election there has been a *rejection vote* against the outgoing President [51 % of those surveyed made a rejection vote, in comparison to just 31 % in 2007].

The third factor is also a global trend, a political shift towards the left since 2004: from a local level (65% of departments, 24 of 26 regions) to nation-wide, to the elections of 2012. And for the first time in its history, the Senate has been ruled by a left/centre-left majority since September 2011. The will for change is now reinforced by a will to support the President in monitoring reforms.

Following the explanations about the background to and reasons for the votes, the second part of the lecture had the intention of explaining the meaning of the results and their consequences. In order to let the audience address different aspects as they wished, some issues were mentioned: It is clear that the French elections will have an impact on European policy, especially on the political co-leadership with Germany (both countries have a leadership role in Europe). It will also affect the choice of policies relating to the financial crisis, between austerity and growth (even if it appears today quite clearly that a mix of those two strategies is necessary) and on the Euro governance (there are always more challenges).

Questions were asked about the role that would be played by the new "overseas MP" elected in the constituency which includes New Zealand. The Ambassador answered that a MP has two different roles: To work for and represent the nation in Parliament, but also to show a close rapport with the voters in a constituency which covers an area of approximately a third of the globe - a challenge, but it is manageable with internet and other communication technologies.

A second audience member asked whether the President had indicated his intentions about the choice between austerity and growth, for the crisis handling policy. Even if there was a clear position of the French government about this point, strong negotiations can be foreseen at international level.

In regards to immigration policy, a national debate is expected to take place shortly in order to decide whether or not foreigners living in France should be entitled to vote.

After a brief discussion about the rise of the far-right and of the extreme parties more generally, the last topic dealt with related to economic changes that would follow the majority's change. This theme is extensive, but the audience was reminded of Mr Hollande's training. Thirty years ago, the President was a teacher of macroeconomics at the French *Institut d'Etudes Politiques* (Political Studies School) in Paris. At the same time, he was also working for the French Accounts Court, and has become an expert in this field.