

Dossier

GETTING OUT THE VOTE IN FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

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For the last thirty years, electoral sociologists in France have observed a decline in electoral participation. France saw a century of high voter turnout, with around 80% of registered voters participating in each election of National Assembly deputies, and a peak of democratic fervor in the 1960s and the 1970s. But since the mid-1980s, French citizens' electoral participation has been constantly decreasing.¹ More than one-third of all registered voters did not cast a ballot in each round of the last two National Assembly elections (2007 and 2012). Participation numbers vary according to the type of election; while the high-stakes, high-intensity presidential elections continue to draw a high proportion of French voters to the polls (around an average 80%), second-order elections do not mobilize as many people as they once did. Today, participation scores suggest a widespread indifference for electoral politics among the French: only two-thirds of registered voters cast their ballots in municipal elections, 50% in regional elections, and hardly more than 40% in European elections.

Put in an international comparative perspective, France trails behind the majority of other western democracies—far behind countries with mandatory voting systems, and only a few points ahead of the United States, where low electoral participation has a longer history.² Political scientists have identified a number of institutional causes for this decline in France. The dominance of the executive branch, and especially the president's office, over the other branches of government in the Fifth Republic makes elections for non-executive office seem less important. The French electoral system uses a mix of two-round and proportional representation voting systems, which are associated



with the weakest electoral participation rates in the world.³ In addition to these institutional causes, political scientists have emphasized the role of specifically political causes. Since 1981, almost every election in France has brought a new political majority, and the perpetual swinging from the center-left to the center-right is at once a symptom of and fuel for voters' frustrations with the dominant parties' inability to confront mass unemployment. As a consequence, confidence in government responsiveness and efficacy are weakened. This decline in electoral turnout is also linked to the weakening of the working-class movement, which had promoted norms of civic participation and made national politics significant for its constituents.⁴

The decline in voter turnout has also had a significant impact on electoral processes and campaigning. Opinion pollsters have not yet been able to accurately predict voter turnout, and, therefore, voting outcomes. Electoral abstention has also changed how campaigns are run. Whereas campaign teams once focused on convincing undecided voters, they now seek to "get out the vote," mobilizing voters favorably predisposed towards their candidate to show up at the polls on election day. This is particularly true in France and in the US. Parties and candidates have recently turned to the rising new industry in political consulting and campaign management, which uses randomized testing to run data-driven electoral campaigns.

This new category of professional political operatives—young, passionate about electoral politics, and highly educated—first appeared in the United States, where the money allocated to political campaigns is in abundant supply. They followed the path opened by the pioneering political scientists Alan Gerber and Donald Green, who for almost twenty years have studied the efficacy of electoral campaign techniques, political communication strategies, message content, and message bearers.⁵ The added electoral value of this political expertise first became apparent during the 2008 presidential election, when Barack Obama put together a campaign team of over fifty people, who bolstered campaign volunteering, electoral door-to-door canvassing, and eventually, voter turnout. Inspired by the work of Gerber and Green, and by the success of Obama's first presidential campaign, which they witnessed in Boston as graduate students, Guillaume Liégey, Arthur Muller, and Vincent Pons created their own campaign technology startup company in France. They designed and implemented a voter mobilization project for the French Parti socialiste, which led them to run François Hollande's successful 2012 field campaign.

This dossier of *French Politics, Culture & Society* developed out of a conference at New York University in October 2014. It explores the impact of voter mobilization efforts on French political culture, and its contributors bring multiple perspectives to their analyses. From the standpoint of his comparative ethnographies of "scientific" door-to-door political canvassing in France and in the US, Julien Talpin shows how the same campaign technique takes on different meanings on both sides of the Atlantic, meanings strongly

shaped by each country's civic cultures. From a historical perspective, the political sociologist Frédéric Sawicki situates this new development in the changing political culture of the French Parti socialiste over the last thirty years. He interprets this campaign innovation as only the latest episode in the transformation of the PS away from a party of non-professional activist members and into a party of professional politicians—people for whom elected office is their only profession and source of income. In Sawicki's analysis, door-to-door canvassing cannot foster the dynamic engagement of non-professional members in the life of their party. Vincent Pons, an academic political scientist and one of the three "importers" of systematic door-to-door canvassing in France, acknowledges that data-driven campaigns may shift how politics are done. But, unlike Sawicki, he does not see these campaign techniques as moving partisan politics further away from the people. Rather, he argues that these techniques may in fact help bring people excluded from national politics back into the fold.

FRÉDÉRIC VIGUIER is a sociologist, and a clinical assistant professor at New York University's Institute of French Studies. His research explores how public policies have shaped social stratification in contemporary France, and conversely, how public policies have responded to changing social hierarchies. His forthcoming book, *La Cause des pauvres*, examines the "cultural turn" in the representation of the popular classes in France that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Céline Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen, *La Démocratie de l'abstention* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).
2. Pascal Delwit, "The End of Voter in Europe? Electoral Turnout in Europe since WWII," *Open Journal of Political Science* 3, 1 (2013): 44–52.
3. Rafael Lopez Pintor and Maria Gratschew, eds., *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2002).
4. Braconnier and Dormagen, *La Démocratie de l'abstention*.
5. Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, *Get out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).