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# WAS 2007 A LANDMARK OR A LET-DOWN FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN FRANCE?

**Rainbow Murray**

*After a chronic history of under-representation for women in France, a number of developments in 2007 appeared to offer new prospects for women politicians. Ségolène Royal was the first credible woman candidate to contend a presidential election; the second application of the 'parity' law led to the election of record numbers of women to the French Parliament; and several women were appointed to key positions in the post-election government. This paper argues that all of these developments amount to significant progress, but are still insufficient to address the persistent problem of women's under-representation.*

## **Introduction**

France has a chronic history of women's under-representation in all aspects of its political system. France has never had a woman president and has only once had a woman prime minister (Edith Cresson 1991–92, who lasted less than a year and was vilified (Jenson and Sineau 1995: 334; Stevens 2007: 138)). Furthermore, by the end of the twentieth century, France had the lowest levels of women parliamentarians in the EU (<http://www.ipu.org>). A major step forward took place in 2000 with the passage of the parity law, which required all political parties to field an equal number of men and women candidates to all elections. This led to increased levels of women in local politics (Bird 2003) but had only a negligible effect in the 2002 legislative elections, with the number of women in the National Assembly increasing from 10.9% to just 12.3%. However, things looked set to improve in 2007 on a number of fronts. Firstly, the Socialist presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal, was the first credible woman to contend a presidential election, and for several months it looked possible that she might win the election. The man who beat her, Nicolas Sarkozy, promised during the campaign that if elected, he would nominate a 'parity' government comprising 50% women. Last but not least, nearly all parties fielded more women candidates to the legislative elections, fuelling hopes of a higher proportion of women in the National Assembly. For all these reasons, 2007 looked set to be a landmark year for women in French politics.

As will be explored in detail below, the reality did not quite live up to the hype. The presidential election was marked by sexism, with excessive questioning of Royal's competence and comments about her appearance and personal life. The 'parity' government promised by Sarkozy did not materialise, although he did appoint women to a range of key posts. Finally, the number of women elected to the National Assembly rose significantly but still remains poor compared to European neighbours.

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## The Presidential Elections

When Ségolène Royal first threw her hat into the ring for the Socialist presidential primary, she was considered something of an outsider. Several male heavyweights within the party were considered more likely prospects, not least François Hollande, the party leader and (at the time) Royal's civil partner. A national secretary of the party, Gilles Martinet, summed up the opinion of the party old guard when he claimed that 'she does not have the stature of a head of state. I don't think she will actually be a candidate' (Mandraud 2006). Nonetheless, Royal's campaign gained rapid momentum throughout 2006, not least because of her novelty status as a woman candidate. In a country disillusioned with its political leaders, Royal represented not only fresh ideas but also a physical embodiment of change. Her campaign was achieved largely without the support of the hierarchy, drawing its strength from soaring poll figures, a strong media presence and an ever-growing grass-roots support—60,000 new members joined the party in the run-up to the nomination period (Mandraud 2006). The media increasingly began to pitch Royal as the main opponent to Sarkozy. When Royal's rivals in the primary made sexist remarks about her (for example, Laurent Fabius infamously asked her who would look after her children if she were elected), Royal managed to turn this to her advantage by making her opponents look out of touch. She went from being the outside candidate to winning a decisive victory in the primary election in November 2006, gaining more than 60% of the vote in a three-horse race.

At the point where Royal won the Socialist primary, she appeared to be a very strong candidate, and her status as the first serious female contender only appeared to enhance the interest in her. Indeed, Michèle Alliot Marie (known as MAM), the most senior woman in Sarkozy's UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) party and a would-be contender for the presidency, claimed that she could 'neutralise the female advantage' of Royal and as such would be 'the only candidate able to beat Ségolène Royal' (<http://mamblog.free.fr>). In the main presidential election, Royal led a feminised (although not particularly feminist) campaign, with frequent references to her family and a pledge to make domestic violence policy her first priority upon assuming office. Her campaign started well, and for the first couple of months she was polling neck and neck with her rival Sarkozy. However, as the campaign rolled into 2007, things began to go rapidly downhill. Royal suffered from a conspicuous lack of support amongst the party leadership, with many key figures in the party barely concealing their distaste for their official candidate. The party leader and Royal's long-term partner, François Hollande, joined the defeated candidates in the primary election in criticising Royal in public (it is now known that Royal and Hollande had separated by this stage, although this was concealed at the time). Not only were these criticisms humiliating for Royal, they also created a public impression of disunity within the party, both of which were costly in electoral terms. The situation became so strained that Royal's publicist was suspended for a month after claiming that 'Royal's only weakness is her partner' (*Le Monde*, 18 January 2007). Royal's distance from the party was also in some respects deliberate, as she had tried to present herself as an emblem of renewal and a break from the past, and she consciously tried to drag the reluctant Socialist party (PS) towards the centre ground. Although it is likely that a move towards the centre is the PS's only option for long-term survival, this proved to be a costly strategy in the short term, as Royal ended up being an isolated figure without the party support that was vital to a successful campaign. This isolation was combined with a

series of embarrassing gaffes from Royal, mostly relating to foreign policy. By the end of January, her poll ratings had plummeted, and they did not recover. Although rumours that Royal might not qualify to the second round were without substance, Sarkozy defeated Royal convincingly in May 2007.

Royal's weaknesses—namely the lack of party support, along with her own blunders—were compounded by a subtly sexist campaign against Royal that was waged by her opponents and by the media (Murray 2008a). Research by Fernández García (2007) illustrates that the media treated Royal differently to her male opponents, and this difference was unfavourable. There were many patronising references to her appearance and to her maternity; for example, *Le Figaro* referred to Royal as '*la maman qui couve, la nounou qui protège*'.<sup>1</sup> Royal was portrayed as both of the two main stereotypes used to depict French women: as a mother figure, and as a sex symbol—for example, she was shown wearing a bikini in a picture taken without her consent in the magazines *Closer* and *VSD*, and was also listed sixth in *FHM's* 100 sexiest women of 2006 (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 10 June 2006). Both these stereotypes were contrasted with the depiction of Sarkozy as a virile leader and a man of action—with the implication that these latter qualities are more befitting of a president (Fernández García 2007). Royal was also much more likely than her male rivals to be referred to by her first name. For example, research by Barnes and Larrivée (2007) shows that in both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, Sarkozy was predominantly referred to by just his surname, while Royal was almost always referred to using her forename as well. The juxtaposition of 'Ségo' versus 'Sarko' was symptomatic of a common trend of referring to women politicians by their first name and men politicians by their surname (another contemporary example is 'Hillary' versus 'Obama' and 'McCain'). This pejorative treatment of Royal was combined with a sustained and insidious questioning of her competence and ability. Despite her ministerial experience and impeccable academic pedigree (she is a graduate of the elite ENA (Ecole nationale d'administration)), she was continually portrayed as incompetent, inexperienced and lacking the mental ability to be president. The consequence of differential media treatment and gendered perceptions of electoral candidates was that Royal scored higher than Sarkozy within opinion polls in the category of 'listens to your needs', but scored much lower than Sarkozy in the key categories of 'competent' (22% to Sarkozy's 52%) and 'has the stature of a leader' (22% to 52%) (Singly 2007).

The media was not alone in making sexist and derogatory comments about Royal; her opponents did so too. They were careful to avoid the overt sexism that had proved costly for Royal's rivals in the primary, preferring instead to make subtle comments that were still no less sexist in their content. Ironically but perhaps deliberately, the worst of these comments came from another woman—MAM in the UMP—who claimed that Royal 'changed her ideas as often as her skirts' (*Le Point*, 29 April 2007). In a similar vein, the website of UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française) candidate François Bayrou carried the headline that 'politics should be about conviction, not seduction'—another attempt to portray Royal as a vacuous sex symbol (<http://www.udf.org>). Throughout her campaign, she was accused of being all style and no substance. She was also criticised for being weak and passive towards her opponents, for example by her refusal to respond in kind to negative campaigning from Sarkozy. However, once she did go on the attack—most notably in the televised debate four days prior to the final ballot—she was criticised again, this time for being too aggressive! (Fracchiolla 2007) She was in an impossible situation whereby she was disapproved of when she conformed to feminine stereotypes, as these

were not seen as befitting a leader, and then disapproved of again whenever she confounded these stereotypes, as this was not seen as befitting a woman. These double standards are frequently levied against women politicians (Kahn 1994a, b; Roncarolo 2000; Bystrom 2004).

Immediately following her defeat, Royal announced her intention to put herself forward as the next party leader once Hollande stood down. However, with the election over, the strains within the party descended into little short of civil war, with plentiful mudslinging and a string of publications denouncing Royal's candidacy (*Le Monde*, 19 September 2007). Royal went on to lose that bitterly contested leadership contest by a very narrow margin to female rival Martine Aubry in November 2008. Despite her defeat, she maintains a decent level of grassroots popularity, and is still a credible contender for the next presidential elections (although it is most likely that she will face some stiff opposition from within as well as beyond the party). The key issue is whether her own ambitions will ever be supported by the hostile party heavyweights.

What legacy has Royal left for women and for France? Perhaps the most important thing is that she has shown that women can compete at the highest level and be considered as *présidentiables* (potential presidential candidates). This is important not just for women wishing to stand for president but for women throughout the political career structure, as it is only once women are considered capable of reaching the top of the ladder that a party will consider promoting them through the ranks. Ironically, Royal helped pave the way for Aubry to become the first woman leader of the PS. French parties have a long history of obstructing women's career paths so this is an important psychological breakthrough (Bird 2003; Opello 2006; Murray 2007). Another potential legacy is a feminised policy agenda. Murray (2008a) argues that Royal did not succeed in feminising the policies of her opponents because they recognised that she 'owned' the issue of gender and therefore tried to keep it off the agenda. Nonetheless, Sarkozy made a number of promises for women during the election, one of which was to have a government comprising 50% women. It is to this issue that we shall now turn.

### A Parity Government?

Sarkozy's initial government—formed between the presidential elections in early May and the legislative elections in late June—was a first indication that he was serious in his resolve to increase the levels of women in government. His initial government contained seven women ministers out of a cabinet of 15, with several of these women in key portfolios. On the surface, this was a great result. Further inspection, however, reveals that when secretaries of state and a high commissioner (all of whom were male) were added to the government, women actually comprised seven out of 21, or a third of the government. This trend continued in the post-election expansion of the government to 33 members, 11 of whom were women. Following the latest reshuffle in January 2009, there are seven women ministers out of 16, (although one, Rachida Dati, is standing down), and a total of 14 women out of 39 members of government. Hence the promise of a 'parity' government has not quite been fulfilled—women are consistently a third rather than a half of the government.

As noted above, one of the strengths of the governments headed by François Fillon, the (male) prime minister, is that women have been given several high ranking positions, rather than all being relegated to second-class posts. These include MAM, who holds the

powerful post of interior minister, and Christine Lagarde, who was rapidly promoted to the position of finance minister after the resignation of her male predecessor in June 2007. Although the power of the ministry of finance has now been divided between two ministers, Lagarde remains a powerful force within the cabinet.

Rachida Dati, the justice minister, has been a big player in the cabinet. This was a controversial appointment given Dati's lack of prior experience (she is a lawyer who served as Sarkozy's spokesperson during the election campaign), but it was also a highly symbolic appointment, as Dati is the first person of North African descent to reach such a high level of public office. Dati's turbulent time in office is coming to a close as she has been put forward as a candidate for the 2009 European elections—a move presumably intended to allow her to exit the government without the indignity of being fired. Other notable appointments include Christine Boutin, minister for housing and towns, who distinguished herself in 2000 by being the only deputy to vote against the introduction of the 'parity' law;<sup>2</sup> Valérie Pécresse, another young up-and-comer, minister for higher education and research; and Christine Albanel, minister for education. Dati, Lagarde, Pécresse and Albanel are all relative newcomers with little prior experience. A positive way of viewing this is to argue that Sarkozy has looked for other qualities in ministers than the traditional path that tends to favour men, with women being promoted on the basis of their potential rather than their prior experience (indeed, the previous deficits of women in politics means that there are few women with sufficient experience). On the other hand, a more cynical approach would be to acknowledge that these women are all dependent on Sarkozy for their positions as, with the exception of MAM and Boutin, they lack their own power bases. Dati and Lagarde have never held elective office, and Albanel's experience is limited to two spells on a regional council. A similar story is true of women secretaries of state. This reinforces the old tradition of the '*fait du prince*', whereby the benevolent male leader grants power to women whose loyalty is guaranteed by the fact that their power depends wholly on him, and he who gives can also take away. Many former women ministers have also started their political careers in this way; for example, only one out of the six women in Chirac's first government under Giscard (1974–76) had an independent mandate, and Elizabeth Guigou, the first woman to hold the position of justice minister in 1997, began her political career as a minister, and did not win a parliamentary seat until 2002 (Helft-Malz and Lévy 2000; <http://www.elizabethguigou.net>). The relative lack of experience of these women ministers also makes them more vulnerable to criticism and attack from their jealous male rivals, who considered themselves to be more worthy candidates. In 1995, Alain Juppé nominated 12 women to his government, only to sack eight of them some six months later. This scandal of the 'Juppettes' (the derogatory name given to these women, being both a play on Juppé's name and the French word for 'miniskirts') does not appear to have been replayed so far in Fillon's government, with every woman surviving the first three government reshuffles, and three new junior women joining the government since March 2008.

Furthermore, there have been a few appointments that have been particularly beneficial to women. The first of these is the nomination of Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin as the minister of health, youth and sport. Bachelot is well known to be a feminist, was a keen supporter of parity and was a former head of the *Observatoire de la Parité* installed under Chirac. She is also something of a loose cannon, known for being unafraid to speak her mind. She has used her appointment to help promote women's interests, for example by taking action against organisations promoting images of excessive thinness and/or

advocating anorexia (*Le Monde*, 15 April 2008). Another important appointment is that of Fadela Amara as secretary of state for urban policy. Amara is an outspoken left-wing feminist of Algerian descent who made her name through the multi-racial feminist group '*Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*' ('neither whores nor doormats'). Finally, the appointment of Rama Yade, a black 30-year-old political aide, to the post of secretary of state for foreign affairs and human rights was further evidence of Sarkozy's commitment to '*ouverture*' (inclusiveness). The three women in government of ethnic minority origin are highly symbolic in a country where parliament is almost exclusively white<sup>3</sup> and the so-called 'universal' model masks endemic racism. The government has also demonstrated '*ouverture*' in other directions; for example, Bernard Kouchner and Eric Besson have previously represented the PS, and some of the male ministers are also newcomers to politics, such as Bernard Laporte, secretary of state for sport and former rugby coach. This strategy was designed to heal the wounds and divisions created by the 2007 presidential election, where Sarkozy generated particular dislike amongst some quarters, to the extent that their electoral strategy was '*tout sauf Sarkozy*'—anyone but Sarkozy.

Overall, the government represents less than was promised for women but more than might otherwise have been expected. The relatively high proportions of women and the prominence of their portfolios are both very positive steps, even if the majority of these women have been selected from outside the party's parliamentary ranks.<sup>4</sup> It will be interesting to see how the careers of these women develop, and whether the current gender balance in government is maintained throughout Sarkozy's presidency. It is certainly true that the government has come closer than the parliament to achieving gender parity, and it is to the parliament that we now turn.

### Parity in Parliament?

The 2007 legislative elections saw the second application of the 'parity' law, introduced in 2000, that obliges all parties to field an equal number of male and female candidates to all elections. The first application, in 2002, was little short of a disaster, with the total percentage of women elected rising from 10.9% to just 12.3%. This poor performance was due to a range of factors including a weak financial penalty for non-implementation that most affected the smallest parties and allowed the parties that won the most seats to side-step the law (Zimmerman 2003; Bird 2004; Sineau and Tiberj 2007). As a result, none of the largest parties in France respected the parity law in 2002, and the victorious parties of the right (the UMP and the UDF) each fielded fewer than 20% women candidates, making them amongst the poorest performers for women. A second problem was that the law does not specify in which seats candidates must be placed, meaning that there was a large disparity between the percentage of women candidates (38.9%) and the percentage of women elected (12.3%). Women were disproportionately placed in unwinnable seats, and Murray (2008b) claims that this was a deliberate strategy for parties on both the right and the left. As Bird (2004: 247) argues, 'where there was a way around the spirit of parity and the objective of including women in political office, those who held political office ... usually took that route. Nowhere is this more true than [in] ... the National Assembly'.

In principle, a similar story might have been expected in 2007. Although the 'parity' law had been reformed to increase the financial penalty by 50%, this reform would not take effect until 2012, meaning that the problems of 2002 had not been resolved.

Nonetheless, a more positive story emerged following the 2007 elections. There were record number of women candidates (41.6% women, rising to 42.25% on mainland France). Although this is still below parity (indicating that some parties were still choosing financial penalties over women candidates), it represents a 2.7 percentage point increase on 2002. More importantly, there was a 50% rise in the levels of women elected to parliament, with a record 107 (18.5%) women deputies. This is a most significant advance for women in French political life, although it is clear that a huge gulf still remains between the proportions of women candidates and women elected. Many of the smaller parties that did not win many or any seats again respected the law out of financial necessity,<sup>5</sup> although this had little or no bearing on the composition of parliament. The key actors were the larger parties, and their performance is illustrated in Table 1.

Three main things are of note when evaluating Table 1. Firstly, it can be seen that all parties achieved an overall increase in their percentage of women candidates in 2007 compared to 2002, although not all parties saw a corresponding increase in the percentage of women elected. Secondly, there is a noticeable left–right gap, with parties of the left (PCF (Parti Communiste Français, the French communist party), Verts, PS) performing considerably better than their main right-wing counterparts (UDF, UMP) both in terms of women candidates and deputies. However, the third thing of note is the extent to which there is a gap between the percentage of women candidates and deputies; parties of the left have considerably more women candidates than parties of the right, but because many of these women are fielded in unwinnable seats, the gap narrows when considering the percentages of women elected.

One of the main obstacles to placing women in winnable seats is the problem of incumbency; parties have good reason for wishing to reselect their incumbents (Murray 2008b). One reason is that parties may be punished by an ousted incumbent if he decides to stand against his own party in order to maintain his seat. This happened in several

**TABLE 1**  
Parties and parity in 2007

Party	% women candidates	% women elected	% women candidates	% women
	2002	2002	2007	elected 2007
PCF	43.6	18.2	46.5	16.7
Verts <sup>1</sup>	48.9	33.3	50.4	25
PS	34.6	16.2	45.5 <sup>2</sup>	26
MoDem <sup>3</sup>	n/a	n/a	36.9	0
UDF	19.9	6.9	27.9	0
UMP	19.6	10.7	26.5	14.2
FN <sup>4</sup>	48.4	n/a	48.8	n/a

*Source:* Ministère de l'intérieur. Parties are arranged from most left-wing (top) to most right-wing (bottom).

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup>The Verts had three deputies elected in 2002 and four in 2007, with one woman elected each time.

<sup>2</sup>This is the combined figure for the PS and their electoral allies such as the PRG. The figure for the PS alone was higher.

<sup>3</sup>MoDem formed as a new party in 2007 following the split from the UDF.

<sup>4</sup>The FN did not win any seats in 2002 or 2007. They are included as an illustration of how small parties without seats are constrained to respect the law, even though they do not support it.



constituencies in 2007 and resulted in a costly splitting of the vote for the parties concerned. For the most part, parties avoided this problem by reselecting their incumbents as a matter of course. As the vast majority of incumbents are male, this reduces opportunities for women to those seats where there is no incumbent. In most cases, this means unwinnable seats, but there are also new opportunities available at each election where the incumbent stands down or is defeated. Given the barrier that incumbency presents to women's election, it might be reasonable to expect parties to prioritise women in seats where there was no incumbent. However, this was not the case in 2007, with 97 of the 144 deputies elected for the first time in 2007 being men. All parties that won new seats gave a majority of these new opportunities to men, as Table 2 illustrates.

The PS had a larger number of incumbents than the UMP in 2002 but still managed to field a higher proportion of women. In 2007, the roles had reversed; the UMP had considerably more incumbents than the PS. This made new seats critical for women as they were the only way to redress the gender imbalance. Again, the PS did better than the UMP in promoting women, but even it gave the majority of new opportunities to men.

## Conclusion

Was 2007 a landmark or a let-down for women in French politics? The answer is a bit of both. There were several landmark events that represented significant advances for women, and these will ensure that 2007 is remembered as a year of important progress. These include a woman qualifying to the second round of the presidential elections; a more feminised government, with women holding one-third of all posts including a range of high-profile cabinet positions, and with at least two members of the government being known feminists; and a record number of women in parliament. These developments have shown that women are capable of reaching the top levels of politics, and they are helping to shift perceptions in France of politics as a man's game. However, the battle for gender equality is still far from over. Despite the gains made in 2007, there were also a number of disappointments. For example, Royal may have qualified to the second round, but she was beaten decisively and was publicly subjected to sexism from the media, her rivals and even her own party. The government, whilst more feminised, was still not the 'parity' government promised in the election. Last but not least, the total proportion of women in parliament remains low, especially compared to most other countries in western Europe. Overall, France is definitely moving in the right direction for women, but still has some considerable way to go before a true parity democracy is achieved. Perhaps the most

**TABLE 2**  
Distribution of new seats by sex and party

Party	UMP	PS	PCF	Verts
Men	46 (77%)	38 (58%)	4 (80%)	1 (100%)
Women	14 (23%)	27 (42%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)
Total	60	65	5	1

*Source:* data collected from <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr>.

*Note:* 'New seats' are defined as those where the winner had not previously served in the National Assembly.

important achievement of 2007 is that it has set down some important precedents on which future elections can build. Once women's presence in politics becomes commonplace and unremarkable, the psychological barriers and sexist stereotypes that have prevented more women from being selected for office will hopefully become a thing of the past.

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### NOTES

1. This translates as 'The mummy who watches over you, the nanny who protects'. Taken from Fernández García (2007).
2. The 'parity' law obliges parties to field an equal number of men and women candidates to all elections and is described in more detail in the third part of this paper.
3. In 2007, a non-white deputy was elected to the National Assembly from mainland France for the first time in the Fifth Republic. The only other non-white deputies are those representing France's overseas territories.
4. Of the 13 women in government, only six were elected as deputies in 2007. One was a former deputy, one was a senator, and the remainder had no parliamentary experience.
5. The penalty amounts to a reduction in state finance in proportion to the deviance from parity, and applies to the portion of state finance that is determined by how many votes a party wins. A second portion of state finance, determined by how many seats a party wins, is unaffected. Hence small parties without seats are dependent on the law, while large parties can afford to offset any losses with the more lucrative gains to be had from winning seats.

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