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PERSPECTIVES
ON THE FRENCH PARTI
SOCIALISTE'S DOWNFALL

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 **Renner**Institut



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Few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case studies is a new publication series from the FEPS and Karl-Renner-Institute Research Programme, who will soon be celebrating their 15th anniversary. This particular collection is designed to provide readers with a set of answers to reoccurring questions such as: *how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Is their current situation a result of a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other queries are covered in the volumes that are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in, they also provide incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – being in that sense an innovative assemblage that feeds in an obvious void not only within the world of think tanks, but also when it comes to contemporary academic writings.

This specific volume depicts the anatomy of the downfall of Parti Socialist (PS) in France and dares to ask what comes next. This is not an easy query, but Philippe Marlière answers it in an incredibly skillful manner. He offers an honest, complete record of the external and internal factors that drove this once-upon-a-time political powerhouse to an electoral position defined in single digits. The story he tells is *the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*, which he accomplished by striking a balance between the facts and the critical evaluations.

This has been a mammoth task, as there has been undoubtedly no shortage of the latter across the spectrum of the progressive factions in France.

Consequently, although a reader reaching for this publication may expect a rather depressing analysis, they will promptly discover that the publication is not a tragedy, but rather a political thriller. It offers insights into the detours on PS path from dominance to doomsday while reflecting if what happened could be explained by the *uniqueness of the French case*. Marlière ponders this hypothesis, admitting the specificity of the SFIO and of the constellation in which another actor has been present of the left (The French Communist Party). But after having considered the full picture, he grows convinced that much of what the PS has been going through was a common experience shared with other sister parties across the EU. There may have been particularities that differed, but in the end – as he says – they came down to time and place. A fascinating example of that is the initially vehemently articulated opposition to the Third Way, which then became effectively absorbed and practiced by PS when at Champs des Elysees.

Furthermore, this study of PS offers several departure points for those, who would like to seek hope and ponder the potential for renewal beyond NUPES – of which survival in long term seems to be questionable at best. To begin with, Marlière brilliantly explains the perpetual tension that manifests itself among socialists, many of whom are not inclined to identify themselves with the culture of compromises and hence also would demand a greater degree of radicalization of the left. And though the party replaced the “gradual rapture of capitalism” with the notion of modernization in 1970s – even last year’s show that the ‘great realignment’ of the subsequent years didn’t equip the party with the answers it needed to persevere through the reshuffle within the entire party-political spectrum. Especially since its leadership was



considered failing and the connection with diverse constituencies weakened. While it is premature to consider PS done and gone because of that, the party certainly has to finally learn a lesson about pluralism on the left and re-find the internal ability to internalize the ideological conflicts.

Additionally, PS would need to resolve a number of defining issues. In the previous decades, the party was evolving towards an “electoral professional party” and the “party of elected officials”. It fit with the demand to bridge among different constituencies, especially that unlike several other parties in the EU – PS, due to historical reasons, was never a full blue-collar party. The problem arose when the party diverted away from the traditional policies and became a proponent of e.g., austerity policies. That cost them not only their image, but was also considered a betrayal of party’s integrity. With the parallel generational change and split from the public administration (from among whose representatives many of the previous representatives of the elites were recruited), PS became an organization with an unclear profile as to whom and why it wanted to represent. It started being questioned about what kind of a state it wanted to build. Deficiency in answering this only deepened the problem of how to position the party vis-à-vis the European integration process, which the party has kept describing as a neo-liberal process – still echoing the sentiments that led to the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty proposal in the inner-party referendum in 2004.

To that end, one can ask where Philippe Marlière can find a source for his cautious optimism and hope that PS can bounce back. Side, of course, from his diagnosis that NUPES was just a means to survival in a specific moment in time and does not have particular chances to maintain its constellation. Well, first his study of the “new social democracy” and “great transformation” (both terms he borrows from

Gerassimos Moschonas) suggests that the PS managed to appeal to younger and female voters, as well as urban professionals. These groups are unlikely to have any alternative candidates than socialists to support in 2027, in which elections Emmanuel Macron cannot stand and Jean-Luc Mélançon rejects to compete. Secondly, there is a lot of demand for social democratic politics in France. And with all the realignments and generational changes going on, the chances for optimal conditions for PS to rise again may be bigger than one thinks. But in order to use them to its advantage, PS has a difficult path ahead, full of hard choices to convince the electorate that they can be trusted again.

Brussels / Vienna, 1st September 2023



Summary

For decades, the Parti Socialiste was the major party of the French Left. It elected a president three times and was the ruling party on several occasions between 1981 and 2017. However, the PS has suffered a crushing defeat in the 2017 presidential and legislative elections.

Since 2017, the PS has been between a rock and a hard place: on its left, it is dominated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France insoumise; and on its right, by Macron's Renaissance party. The success of both parties has a lot to do with the PS's own setbacks. LFI has attracted a significant fraction of former socialist voters who felt that the PS could hardly be distinguished from a centre-right liberal party. Emmanuel Macron's candidacy, and election, in 2017 was rendered possible by internal conflicts in the PS during François Hollande's term. Those who felt that Benoît Hamon's candidacy was too left-wing, or who now regard an alliance with Mélenchon as "illegitimate", found refuge in Macron's party.

Both LFI and Renaissance are "personal parties", that is, one-man movements that were created by Mélenchon and Macron to help them win the presidential election. It remains to be seen whether these two parties will survive their founders' departure. This may give the PS a lifeline to recover some of its lost voters. For that, it would have to appeal to voters who want the PS to shift left, and moderate voters who do not want the party to be part of a coalition that is dominated by LFI. To combine the two types of demands will not be easy.

1

Introduction

In the run-up to the 2022 presidential election, the authoritative daily *Le Monde* did not mince its words regarding the Parti socialiste's (PS) campaign:

“Such a low level of intentional votes is unprecedented in the history of Le Parti socialiste that ruled the left for almost half a century. It should scare everyone, but the fading Hidalgo campaign is like a slow-motion crash test. Or a train running wild out of its tracks with nobody paying attention.” (Paris, 2022)

Those are very harsh words indeed but, in the end, the assessment was correct: Anne Hidalgo, the socialist candidate, secured a paltry 1.75% of the share of the vote in the first round of the election.

In the history of European social democracy, the PS's recent downfall stands out. With the benefit of hindsight, it would be tempting to claim today that this “socialist collapse comes from afar” (Fulla, 2022). In truth, no one saw it coming in 2017. Six years on, it remains difficult to explain why the dominant party of the French left suffered two crushing defeats in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, and why its national share of the vote only gives the PS a very modest parliamentary representation in the National Assembly today.

With the PS showing no signs of a significant electoral recovery, it is important to study the French situation for multiple reasons. Firstly, as things stand, France's social democratic force is so weakened that

the prospect of a PS win in a general election any time soon would be totally unrealistic. Secondly, the French left is currently dominated by a left populist movement. It is a rather unique situation in Europe, bar the Greek case study. Thirdly, the factors that led to the PS's crushing defeats are both exogenous and endogenous. The PS, like all social democratic parties, has been affected by deep economic and technological changes over the past 40 years. Those transformations have impacted its ideology, policies, organisation, membership and unravelled its traditional electoral coalition. This study mostly concentrates on the endogenous factors: what are the intrinsic factors unique to the French situation?

The case study is divided into five main chapters; each of them discusses specific features of the French situation. The study starts with an historical overview of the PS. It stresses the lack of unity within the French Labour movement, with the rivalry between socialists and communists. The existence of an influential communist party, which appealed to the working class, somehow explains the persistence of a culture of political radicality within the PS. The French socialists have traditionally been ill at ease with the notion of "social democracy", which for them is synonymous with excessive compromise with capitalism. Hence, the high expectations of party members and voters whenever the socialists came to power in 1936, 1981, 1997 and 2012 (Chapter 2).

The "2017 electoral car crash" is studied in detail: why did this debacle happen? When François Hollande was elected president in 2012, the PS had already been largely abandoned by its traditional constituencies (working class and public sector voters), and it had become an "electoral-professional party" with relatively few members. Hollande's weak leadership and right-wing economics reignited internal feuds between "reformists" and "radicals" within the party (Chapter 3).



Under the Hollande presidency, the PS lost all its leadership positions in the French institutional system: presidency; National Assembly; Senate; regions; *départements*; and cities. Chapter 4 analyses the party's electoral performance in three types of elections since the 1970s: presidential; legislative; and European.

Chapter 5 looks at the socialist relationship with European integration. The European Union (EU) has been an identity maker for French socialists since François Mitterrand's presidencies. Although committed Europeans, many French socialists have grown disillusioned with what they label "neoliberal Europe", and the construction of an elusive "social Europe".

After two consecutive crushing defeats in presidential elections, the PS agreed to join a new union of the lefts under the leadership of Unbowed France (LFI, La France Insoumise), a left populist movement. The PS is currently a minor partner in this left-wing coalition. On one hand, the party has shifted left again and, in theory, has broken with the Hollande era. On the other hand, this alliance has restarted internal battles among socialists: some support participation in the New Popular, Ecological and Social Union (NUPES, Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale); others are hostile to it (Chapter 6).

2

An historical overview of the PS

2.1 Unification of the French socialist movement

The French socialist movement was unified with the founding of the French section of Workers' International (SFIO, Section Française de Internationale Ouvrière) in 1905 (Ladrech and Marlière, 1999). This put an end to 25 years of chronic division and weakness on the left. The SFIO welcomed various socialist factions and small parties, which had emerged in the aftermath of the Paris Commune: trade unionists; anarchists; reformists; and independent socialists rallied to join the new party. The two most influential figures were Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) and Jules Guesde (1845-1922). The former, although a dedicated socialist, was open to a reformist approach to socialism via the parliamentary system and by upholding the main values of liberal democracy. The latter was, in theory, an uncompromising defender of class struggle and a major proponent of Marxism in France.

Jaurès regarded the republican regime, first installed in 1792 in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as the cornerstone of a future socialist society. A committed pacifist, he was assassinated in July 1914 by a rabid nationalist, on the eve of the First World War. Jean Jaurès's ideas, and his emphasis on universal rights and on the

humanistic dimension of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Men and the Citizen, have deeply impacted the world view and political culture of French socialists over time.

Socialist unity only lasted until 1920. Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the SFIO had to decide whether to join the new Communist International. At their 1920 party congress, the majority of delegates voted in favour and left the party. They founded the French Communist party (PCF, Parti communiste français). A minority, led by Jauressian Léon Blum (1872-1950), rejected Lenin's and Zinoviev's third international adherence conditions. This historic event split the socialist movement into two parties and created an entrenched division in the French Labour movement that still prevails, to date. This is an important factor to consider when assessing French social democracy today. Unlike most other social democratic parties in Europe, democratic socialism in France was durably weakened in its early days. Additionally, the rivalry on the left with a communist party, which, for a long time, appealed to most blue-collar workers, contributed to shaping the socialists' political beliefs. After the Second World War, the PS never quite came to terms with European social democratic fundamentals, such as support for a mixed economy, reformism or the notion of compromise with political or economic opponents. In other words, the presence of an influential PCF on the left incited the PS to present itself as somehow more radical than a party simply committed to reforming capitalism.

2.2 Renewal and heyday of French socialism (1971-2012)

The old SFIO, in constant decline since 1945, was replaced by the New Socialist Party in 1969. However, the real relaunch of the

party did not take place until the 1971 congress. The PS was given a new *élan* thanks to the arrival of younger activists from various left parties. François Mitterrand, an experienced statesman and a fierce de Gaulle opponent, became the new PS leader. In 1972, the PS, PCF and Radical Movement of the Left (MRG, Mouvement des radicaux de gauche) signed a "Common Programme" of government, which outlined ambitious measures of economic and social rupture from the conservative policies of the previous 30 years. The union of the left period (1972-1978) was marked by a radicalisation of French socialism. Marxism was again the ideological point of reference, and the PS, together with its left-wing allies, embarked on a radical programme of nationalisation. Mitterrand, as candidate of the left, was narrowly defeated by centre-right candidate Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the 1974 presidential election (50.6% to 49.4%).

The left also lost the 1978 legislative elections due to a public dispute between socialist and communist partners about the "updating" of the Common Programme. However, François Mitterrand was eventually elected president of the republic on his third attempt in 1981. This was the first time that a left-wing candidate had been elected president since the launch of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The socialists won an absolute majority in the legislative elections of June 1981. The government comprised communist ministers, and it implemented Keynesian-style policies as well as a range of radical social measures (fourth week of paid holiday or retirement age pushed back from 65 to 60). This did not last long. From 1982 onwards, Mitterrand decided on a "pause" in the reforms as economic results were poor (high inflation and high unemployment), and the franc was under attack by the markets. Austerity policies were launched, and a new government led by Laurent Fabius was formed, without communist participation. The theme of "gradual rupture with capitalism" of 1981 was replaced

with that of “modernisation” of the French economy. In the neoliberal atmosphere of the 1980s, the French socialists seemed to come to terms (some reluctantly, others more keenly) with the notions of “market”, “profit” or “enterprise”. As early as 1982, Mitterrand made an important political choice for his country and his party: he maintained France’s membership in the European Monetary System and affirmed its commitment to European integration. Consequently, he rejected the pursuit of socialist reforms in a hostile European environment.

The socialists were defeated in the 1986 legislative elections, but Mitterrand was elected for a second term in 1988, which was significantly less reformist than the first one. As a result of continued austerity policies and economic orthodoxy, as well as a series of corruption scandals involving socialist MPs and officials, the PS was emphatically rejected by the electorate in the 1993 legislative elections. However, following President Chirac’s dissolution of the National Assembly in 1997, the PS, under the leadership of Lionel Jospin, unexpectedly defeated the conservative majority and formed a coalition government named the “Plural Left”. It was composed of socialist, communist, left radical and ecologist ministers. This new socialist-led government was initially reformist (notably with the flagship policy of a reduction in working time to 35 hours a week), but it ended in a rather economically orthodox fashion, with the pursuit of privatisation and tax cuts for the more affluent. The 2002 presidential election concentrated on law-and-order issues, which favoured the conservative and far-right candidates, and Jospin was eliminated in the first round. Jacques Chirac, the incumbent president, faced Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round. For the first time since the Vichy regime, a candidate from the far right had made it through to the run-off vote.

In October 2011, the PS organised a primary election open to members and sympathisers, to nominate the party presidential



candidate for the 2012 election. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the polls' clear favourite, could not run, as he faced a sexual assault complaint in New York. François Hollande was eventually chosen, and he defeated Nicolas Sarkozy, the incumbent president. The socialists had remained out of power for ten years.

2.3 In the political wilderness

In 2017, Hollande's PS was dominant in all echelons of French politics. Elected president after designating finance as his "enemy" and promising to tax the wealthy, the socialist president ended his term praised by employers but vilified by unions and the left. A controversial labour reform that injected flexibility into France's job market, the extension of working hours or capping of the cost of wrongful dismissals prompted a revolt in the PS. By the end of his term, François Hollande had a 4% approval rating (Tamkin, 2016). He announced that he would not seek re-election for a second term.

In the 2017 presidential election, Emmanuel Macron, Hollande's former advisor and later finance minister, founded his own party – The Republic Onwards (LREM, La République en marche) – and decided to run. In the PS primary election, left-winger Benoît Hamon defeated Manuel Valls, a former prime minister and on the right wing of the party. Hamon came in fifth position and received a poor 6.30% share of the vote. This was by far the worst result since the PS's creation in 1971. In the subsequent legislative elections, the party secured 7.40% in the first round and dropped from 289 to 30 seats; its worst representation in the National Assembly since the start of the Fifth Republic. In July 2017, Hamon left the party and launched a movement called Génération.s. In April 2018, the relatively unknown Olivier Faure, originally a Hollande ally, was elected new party leader. He promptly declared that the PS

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would be in opposition to President Macron and his government. This was, for a while, questionable, as important socialist figures (former ministers, MPs, officials) had rallied with the Macron camp since the presidential election.

In the 2022 presidential election, the PS showed no sign of an electoral recovery. Anne Hidalgo, the Paris mayor, received 1.75% share of the vote. She came in fourth position of all left-wing candidates behind her LFI, ecologist and communist competitors. This was the worst presidential result in the entire party history. In the following legislative elections, the PS joined a left-wing electoral alliance called NUPES (see Chapter 6). The party won 28 seats; its worst performance in a national election since 1958.



3

What caused the 2017 electoral “car crash”?

It is no exaggeration to qualify the 2017 results as electoral debacles. Dominant on the left until 2012, and one of the two main parties in French politics together with the conservative *Républicains*, the PS literally suffered an electoral “car crash”. It is not the 2017 defeats that surprised observers, but their sheer magnitude. Seven years on, the PS is still showing no real sign of a national recovery, although it remains influential through its strong local base of municipalities across France. Compared to François Hollande’s 28.60% share in 2012, Benoît Hamon’s 6.30% share in 2017 underlined the depth and brutality of the PS’s downfall. In the legislative elections, the party’s 7.40% share in the first round was also extremely weak compared to the party’s 29.3% in 2012. It represented a drop from 289 to 30 seats. Previously, the worst electoral result had been the first round of the 1993 legislative elections, when the PS received 17.5% of the share of the vote and had 57 deputies elected. It is therefore important to understand the reasons for such a rapid and spectacular loss of support.

3.1 Political realignment and party collapse

The “2017 downfall” was a turning point for the left and French politics in general. These electoral debacles marked the end of the PS as a major party of government and was even described as a “terminal collapse” by some political scientists (Escalona, 2017). In other words, it seemed obvious to analysts that the PS’s period of domination on the left, which lasted over 40 years (1973-2017), had come to an end.

Charles S. Mack has shown that when a significant political realignment happens, it often coincides with the demise of an established party (Mack, 2010). The phenomenon is due to various factors, notably, the failure of leadership, the alienation of the core base, the intensity of national identity cleavage issues and the availability of a successor party. In the French situation, all factors played a role in the PS’s dramatic weakening. Mack’s framework is well-suited to the French case scenario. By 2017, President Hollande was deeply unpopular amongst voters, having antagonised his left-wing supporters; French politics was more unstable and polarised than ever with the steady rise of Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN, Rassemblement National); and Macron’s candidacy offered a home to people who rejected Mélenchon’s left populism and the right-wing drift of Nicolas Sarkozy’s Les Républicains. Emmanuel Macron came across as a young moderniser, who seemed “doubly liberal” (economically and culturally). He therefore appealed to moderate voters from the left and from the right (Marlière, 2017).

There is a similar example in France of a once-dominant left-wing party, which followed a spiral of decline. The Parti Radical (PR, Radical Party) was founded in 1901. It was one of the main left-wing parties until the Second World War. The party’s influence and electoral success



started to dwindle with the decline of the independent middle classes, which formed the core of its supporters. The party never disappeared – it still exists today – but it morphed into a small organisation with few electoral bastions, few members and few voters. It would be tempting to consider that in 2017 the PS entered this slow but irreversible spiral of decline. A parallel could be drawn with the fate of Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (PASOK, Panhellenic Socialist Movement), which went from being the main Greek party in 2009 to near annihilation in the January 2015 elections. However, in the May and June 2023 elections, PASOK was significantly on the rise. The Greek example shows that it would be premature to consider that the French PS is bound to become a marginal party.

However, the fact that the PS has not made any electoral gains at the national level since 2017 demonstrates that it is still not regarded as a party of government by voters. The abysmal results in the 2022 presidential and legislative elections tend to prove that point. A large chunk of what used to be its electorate (a social class mix of blue- and white-collar workers, as well as a section of professionals) has deserted the party (see Chapter 4). Jean-Luc Mélenchon's LFI managed to capture a larger segment of left-wing votes in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections. This was a big blow to the PS because the presidential election in the Fifth Republic is the key contest to elect the most powerful political figure in French politics. Once the president is elected, voters will, in general, confirm their vote by giving the president's party a majority in the National Assembly. The PS has therefore lost its (informal) status of main opposition party; a position that it had occupied since the 1970s.

It is interesting to look at the timing of the PS's downfall. The 2014 municipal elections were not a success – the party lost many major cities – but they were nowhere near a disaster. The PS held together up

until the 2015 regional elections, when it lost 15 out of the 21 regions it governed. Despite these two setbacks, nothing could have indicated that the party would face near annihilation in 2017.

The electoral fate of the PS is quite extraordinary. Between the late 1970s and 2017, the PS was the dominant party on the left. From 1978 onwards, it overtook the PCF in terms of electoral performance and was the most-voted left-wing party in every election. Between 1981 and 2012, socialist candidates won the presidential election, the biggest electoral contest in France (François Mitterrand in 1981 and 1988, and François Hollande in 2012). In the same period, the PS was in power for 20 years (1981-1986, 1988-1993, 1997-2002 and 2012-2017). The PS has arguably been one of the most successful French political parties of the past 40 years.

3.2 What went wrong?

Endogenous and exogenous factors can explain the socialist collapse. In 2012, the PS concentrated most political powers: besides the presidency, it had an absolute majority in the National Assembly and could legislate as it saw fit; it was the main party in the Senate (high chamber) for the first time in the Fifth Republic; and it ran France's major cities (Paris, Lyon, Lille, Nantes, Rennes, Reims, Strasbourg and Toulouse) and 15 out of 21 regions. However, it turns out that the PS was a political colossus with feet of clay. Hollande defeated Sarkozy quite narrowly in the presidential election, with 51.64% to 48.36%. This was the second-smallest margin in the decisive run-off since the start of the Fifth Republic. Hollande was not the first-choice candidate for the party. The campaign focused on Sarkozy's record, and the incumbent president was deeply unpopular: anti-Sarkozyism mobilised voters from the left but also from the centre-right. The PS was also



boosted by the two-ballot majoritarian system in the first round of the legislative election: with only 29.4% of the share of the vote, it received an absolute majority.

There are structural factors too; 2017 marked the end of a long phase of political domination, which relied on the PS's ability to appeal to various constituencies: blue-collar workers; white-collar workers; and significant segments of professionals. The backing of various social classes, which was key to the PS's electoral successes throughout the 1970s and up to the 2010s, progressively stalled. Firstly, working-class support was on the wane. Until the 1990s, the party had ties with blue-collar workers, notably in its northern bastions (Nord-Pas-de-Calais). From 1978 onwards, the working-class vote shifted from the PCF to the PS. Between 1978 and 1988, the PS was, for a short spell, a true social democratic party with strong working-class backing and over 200,000 members, which was a decent-sized membership by French standards (Ladrech and Marière, 1999). But this did not last long. From the 1990s onward, the PS started losing its blue-collar support. By the 2010s, a third of them voted for the far-right RN, and many had simply stopped voting and abstained. The party still had around 170,000 members in 2012. Today, there are barely 40,000 fee-paying members (L'INA, 2023). The party has lost three quarters of its members since François Hollande's election in 2012.

The PS is a party that arguably had “stopped talking to the popular categories” (Lefebvre, 2007) long before the 2017 electoral “car crash”. In a 2011 memo, Terra Nova, a think tank close to Dominique Strauss-Kahn (before his New York legal setbacks), attempted to make the PS's abandonment of working-class voters official (Ferrand, Pudent and Jeanbart, 2011). Terra Nova's writers argued that the working classes did not want or could not adapt to a competitive and open society, and therefore, were to be left to their fate. As a result,

the memo suggested turning toward different “excluded groups”, described as “open”, “optimistic” and “tolerant”. Who are these new excluded classes? The young, women, minorities, the unemployed and insecure workers. From a strictly electoral perspective, such an approach seems unwise: 56% of blue-collar workers and 51% of employees still voted for Ségolène Royal in the second round of the 2007 presidential election. From a sociological perspective, the Terra Nova memo ignored the sociological realities observed over many years of research in the field. The issues dividing generations, genders, ethnic origins or living circumstances (and defining class conflict), have both socio-economic and cultural causes (unemployment, insecurity, unequal access to education, housing, lack of purchasing power, but also racism or sexism). Types of domination are neither purely socio-economic nor cultural; they are indeed intersectional, as they overlap and add up (Marlière, 2012).

The truth of the matter is that the PS never secured close links with blue-collar workers for a variety of reasons. From 1920 onward, the SFIO, then the PS, had to compete with the PCF, a truly workerist party that established organic links with the General Confederation of Labour (CGT, Confédération Générale du travail), the main French trade union. The PS was never a mass party, unlike most social democratic parties in the North of Europe and in Scandinavia. Additionally, because of the rivalry and political competition with the PCF, the PS never quite managed to adjust its rather radical discourse to its reformist action. For all these reasons, support from the working class was never guaranteed for the PS. This marks a major difference with most other social democratic parties in Europe (Marlière, 1999).

The PS's rise to power in the 1980s coincided with the electoral breakthrough of the far right. During Mitterrand's first term in office, the Front national (FN, National Front) was able to impose its political

agenda: immigration and the alleged “incompatibility” between Islam and “French republican values”. Those topics started being debated in the political mainstream. The narrowing of the PS’s electoral base (notably of its working-class support) was patent in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for the second round of the presidential election. Jospin’s performance was unexpectedly poor, and he came third in the race.

During his presidency, Hollande had to fight high unemployment. His economic and social policies left his electoral base disenfranchised and angry. Evidence of this included the electoral defeats in the 2014 municipal and the 2015 regional elections. Hollande’s presidency was marked by the pursuit of austerity policies and “supply-side” economics to allegedly boost economic competitiveness. His economic platform was based on the reduction of labour costs to enhance employment and investment. This supply-side economics was quite a far cry from Hollande’s claim at a rally in the run up to the 2012 election that “his enemy was finance”, or from his campaign programme. Once elected, he broke his main campaign pledges, such as the 75% tax on the wealthiest, or dramatically watered them down, such as a gradual and fairer tax reform or a law on the separation and regulation of banking activities. Government officials kept repeating that there was no alternative to those policies in today’s world. The French socialists in power ironically embraced the Third Way mantra almost 20 years after New Labour in the United Kingdom. In the 2010s, the Labour Party under Ed Miliband had started to distance itself from Blairite economics (Goes, 2016).

François Hollande somewhat surprisingly defined his ordoliberal policies as “social democratic”. Even by Blairite standards, this was not social democratic economics. Blairism fully followed market economics and neoliberal globalisation, but it also involved in-depth

redistribution through a proactive State in the economy. The French socialist government's economic policies lacked this dimension. Hollande's use of the adjective "social democratic" further discredited the notion on the French left. French socialists have always seen themselves as "socialists" not "social democrats". The former indicates a critical relationship with capitalism, whereas the latter sounds far too accommodating of it (Marlière, 2007b). Consequently, in France, the notion of "social democracy" is now commonly associated with "centrist" politics.

3.3 A disunited party

One should bear in mind that Emmanuel Macron was closely associated with these policies, first as Hollande's Élysée close advisor, then as finance minister in a socialist government. When the PS criticises Macron's "right-wing economics" today, it ought to acknowledge that those policies were first implemented by Macron himself at the end of Hollande's presidency. In short, Hollande's economics ran counter to classic social democratic policies of state intervention and redistribution. The irony is that these policies did not bear fruition by the time Hollande left the Élysée Palace, and they paved the way for Macron's neoliberal reforms from 2017 onwards. Also, unemployment remained high in 2017, and inequalities increased. In the end, Hollande's policies angered some of his backbenchers as well as large segments of his electorate. This time round, President Hollande could not point to any progressive reforms on a par with those of the Mitterrand presidencies like nationalisation, the granting of a fourth week of paid holiday and the reduction in retirement age to 60, or the 35-hours-a-week reform of the Jospin government. This was the first time that the left in power could not claim any significant left-wing reforms. A modest tax on capital,



the raising of the minimum wage or the increase in the school year allowance cannot be considered “flagship measures” for the left.

François Hollande’s economic policies were strongly contested by socialist MPs and activists. A group of socialist parliamentarians opposed and even voted against some of the government’s reforms. They were nicknamed *frondeurs* (rebels) by the media. The last year of Hollande’s only term was marked by two reform proposals, which further antagonised the socialist base. One proposed to enshrine in the constitution the stripping of French nationality from those convicted of terrorist crimes. France is a nation of migrants, and this extremely severe measure dismayed many socialist officials, activists and voters. Hollande eventually gave up on the idea, but it left the party deeply divided and scarred. The other bill proposal planned to reform the labour market by loosening up employment regulations. This yet again represented a major break from the party’s previous policies and doctrine on the topic. Social movements strongly opposed the reform to no avail. The law was finally adopted, despite remonstrations on the left. This further angered left-wing voters, made Hollande even more unpopular and it explains to some extent why those voters deserted the PS in droves in the 2017 presidential election. Many of them voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who pledged to ditch Hollande’s reforms, should he be elected.

Critics argue that the real reasons for the PS debacle are to be found elsewhere. They point to the PS’s “exceptionalism” in the social democratic family in Europe. The PS arguably does not know how to fix an ongoing tension between its action and its ideals, that is, between its deep integration into the French institutional system and the fact that it still does not consider itself a reformist and mainstream party (Bergounioux and Grunberg, 1992). They also stressed that Hollande was unable to run for a second term in 2012, not because the party

was in a bad state, but due to internal opposition to the leadership from party “rebels” (Grunberg, 2022). They contended that two lefts unsuccessfully tried to coexist in the PS: Hollande’s left, which was fully reconciled with reformism; and another that still dreamt of radical ruptures. They argued that these two lefts were “incompatible”. This thesis may have had legs when the PS’s left was still strong in the party. However, since the departure of Mélenchon and Hamon, before and after the 2017 presidential election, the PS clearly comes across as a reformist party in its discourse and action.

The dwindling number of members had another negative effect. From the 1990s onwards, the PS became what Angelo Panebianco labelled an “electoral-professional party”, that is, a publicly funded party, media-driven rather than based on a mass membership, and with its electoral performance as its main objective (Panebianco, 1988). With fewer members, the PS also turned into a “party of elected officials”, that is, a party in which many members hold an elected position at the local, regional or national levels (Lefebvre and Sawicki, 2006, and Sawicki, 2017). In other words, the PS progressively lost touch with its voters and with the population in general.

4

From a dominant party to a small(ish) partner on the left

When compared to other European social democratic parties, a significant characteristic of the PS is its rather poor electoral record. Scholars argue that the PS is “one of the least successful of the major European social democratic parties” (Di Francesco-Mayot, 2018). Since the start of the Fifth Republic, the party has rarely received more than 30% share of the vote in the first round of a national election. Since 1958, the PS has only won three (1981, 1988, 2012) out of the 11 presidential elections contested through direct popular suffrage. It only was in government for 20 years over a 65-year period. It had to share power with a conservative president (Jacques Chirac, between 1997 and 2002 during the third period of *cohabitation*). François Mitterrand’s party failed to win two legislative elections in a row, when he was elected president in 1981 and re-elected in 1988. In 1986 and 1993, during the first two periods of *cohabitation*, he had to preside alongside a conservative prime minister (Jacques Chirac, between 1986 and 1988, and Édouard Balladur, between 1993 and 1995) and conservative governments, which greatly limited his room for manoeuvre.

The PS’s weak performance is particularly obvious since the 2000 constitutional reform, which established a five-year presidential

term (down from seven). Out of five elections since the reform, the socialist candidate failed to make it through to the second round on three occasions (Jospin in 2002, Hamon in 2017 and Hidalgo in 2022). Despite these patchy and average electoral results, the PS has nonetheless been the most successful party on the left since 1958.

Presidential elections

Year	Candidates	First-round vote	Second-round vote
1974	François Mitterrand	1,044,373 (43.25%)	12,971,604 (49.19%)
1981	François Mitterrand	7,505,960 (25.85%)	15,708,262 (51.76%)
1988	François Mitterrand	10,367,220 (34.10%)	16,704,279 (54.02%)
1995	Lionel Jospin	7,097,786 (23.30%)	14,180,644 (47.36)
2002	Lionel Jospin	4,610,113 (16.18%)	Did not qualify
2007	Ségolène Royal	9,500,112 (25.87%)	16,790,440 (46.94%)
2012	François Hollande	10,272,705 (28.63%)	18,000,668 (51.64%)
2017	Benoît Hamon	2,291,288 (6.36%)	Did not qualify
2022	Anne Hidalgo	616,478 (1.75%)	Did not qualify

In 2017 and 2022, the socialist candidates received an historically low share of popular votes. This should worry the PS leadership. The presidential election is the key election in France. The president is the most powerful political actor, and their election is followed by the legislative election soon after. Whomever wins the presidential contest is quasi-guaranteed to have this vote confirmed by a victory in the legislative election. The PS not only failed to qualify his/her candidate for the run-off vote on three occasions in the last five elections, but it also played a marginal role in this election. Voters did not regard any of the socialist candidates as potential presidents (although less true of Jospin, this was certainly the case for Hamon

and Hidalgo), and they no longer considered the PS an obvious party of government.

Except for the 1974 election, when Mitterrand was the single candidate of the left (he was backed by the PCF), no socialist candidates have managed to pass the 30% threshold in the first round, bar Mitterrand in 1988. It is true that the election is competitive, as most left-wing parties field a candidate; therefore, the total left-wing vote is split in the first round. However, this shows that, in the landscape of a divided French left, the PS was never hegemonic on the left in electoral terms. Having said that, the historic division of the left should not be considered an irreversible hindrance for the left to advance to the second round of a presidential election and to win it. After all, the PS won this election on three occasions (1981, 1988 and 2012).

It is rather that the electoral weakness of the left altogether, as well as the increasingly poor cooperation between the different left-wing candidates between the two rounds, explains the weak performance of the left in general. Left-wing voters are less disciplined than they were. The left populist Mélenchon could not fully benefit from left-wing voters' tactical voting. Some socialist, communist and ecologist sympathisers did not vote for him, although he was best placed to qualify for the second round. Mélenchon's politics and personality had a polarising effect: some left-wing voters would never contemplate voting for him in the first or second rounds of a presidential election. This is a problem for the whole left: tactical voting on the left used to work better when the candidate ahead after the first round was a socialist. To win a presidential election, the left needs to propose a candidate that can appeal to the left and to the centre. Mitterrand used to mobilise those various electorates, whereas Mélenchon clearly put off moderate voters.

Legislative elections

<i>Year</i>	<i>First round</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Seats</i>
1973	4,579,888	18.9	89/491
1978	6,412,819	22.8	104/491
1981	9,077,435	36.0	267/491
1988	8,493,702	34.8	275/577
1993	4,476,716	17.6	59/577
1997	5,961,612	23.5	255/577
2002	6,086,599	24.1	140/577
2007	6,436,136	24.7	186/577
2012	7,618,326	29.4	280/577
2017	1,685,677	7.4	30/577
2022	877,544	3.9	28/577

The PS's electoral performance in the legislative elections follows a similar pattern. The party rarely managed to get more than 30% share of the vote in the first round. There are two reasons for this. One has to do with the multiple left-wing candidacies in each constituency (PS, PCF, Green, LFI etc.). Another is that, since 1958, the total of left-wing votes has never reached 50% in the first round of a national election. French voters have more often voted for right-wing parties (that includes the far right today) than left-wing ones. In the 2022 election, the formation of the NUPES coalition was beneficial for LFI. Unbowed France fielded 326 candidates (56.50% of all NUPES candidates) and the PS was only allocated 70 constituencies (11.96% of all NUPES candidates) on the grounds that Mélenchon had outperformed all other left-wing candidates in the presidential race. Considering its current electoral strength, it would have been hard for the PS to win more than 28 seats in total if it had decided to contest this election outside the

NUPES agreement. In truth, the socialists had no choice but to accept this electoral deal with LFI.

European elections

Year	Votes	%	Seats
1979	4,763,026	23.5	20/81
1984	4,188,875	20.8	20/81
1989	4,286,354	23.6	17/81
1994	2,824,173	14.5	15/87
1999	3,874,231	22,0	18/87
2004	4,960,756	28.9	31/78
2009	2,838,160	16.5	14/72
2014	2,650,357	14,0	12/74
2019	1,403,170	6.19	6/79

The French socialists have not performed better, so far, in a European election. Since the first direct election of MEPs in 1979, the PS's electoral results have been average and patchy. Their best score was 28.9% in 2004 during Jacques Chirac's second term as president. This may be somewhat surprising given that the PS has consistently been, together with Europe Ecology – The Greens (EELV, Europe Écologie Les Verts), the most pro-European party on the left. There are two possible explanations for these disappointing results. Firstly, in France, the European election is an "opposition vote". European issues are not salient in the run-up to the election, and it is a way for voters to freely express their discontent with the incumbent government. When they were in office, the socialists were penalised by this "sanction vote". The European election, because it does not directly affect the government

of the day, is an election that gives a platform to smaller or fringe parties. FN's electoral breakthrough occurred in the 1984 European election. For a long time, the FN performed better in a European election than in a national election. Secondly, the PS's "Europeanism" is no longer an asset on the left. With the rise of the populist left, which is largely Eurosceptic, left-wing voters have started to be more critical of the EU's "neoliberal" policies. That said, the PS's 6.19% share in the 2019 election was abysmal. Growing Euroscepticism on the left cannot by and of itself account for such a bad result (see Chapter 5).

In electoral terms, the PS's prospects are quite grim. Since the 2017 downfall, it has been unable to regain its status as a major party on the left and a party of government. Evidence of this includes the two presidential debacles in 2017 (6.36%) and 2022 (1.75%). Without retaking this position soon, the PS might have to play second fiddle in French politics: the party would be too big to die, but too small to really influence the political game. To impact French politics, any party must be able to win the presidential election on a regular basis. In this respect, party unity and discipline are paramount, and the PS has not had much of it in the past years. Since Hollande's presidency, the PS has continuously been riddled with internal divisions. In the first instance, the left-wing "rebels" of the party opposed many of Hollande's policies and went as far as being close to voting for a motion of censure tabled by the right (*Le Monde* and Reuters, 2016). In the second instance, the leadership's decision to join NUPES in June 2022 has reopened wounds within the party: the PS is divided today between those who think that it is in the party's best interest to be part of this left-wing electoral alliance and shift left policy wise; and those who argue that the PS loses all credibility by being a junior partner in a coalition led by LFI.



4.1 An image problem

Beyond political divisions, the party has an image problem. Since their retirement from politics or their death, the “party elephants”¹ (Lionel Jospin, Laurent Fabius, Michel Rocard, Pierre Joxe, Martine Aubry, Ségolène Royal, Henri Emmanuelli, etc.) have progressively been replaced with younger and untested party officials. Anne Hidalgo may be the mayor of Paris, but she has never played any significant role in the party nor in national politics. Benoît Hamon was also little known outside the party circles, and his 2017 programme represented a major policy shift to the left compared to the Hollande era. To win a presidential election, the PS will first have to generate competent party figures. It currently lacks this type of savvy and popular politician.

The PS is currently in decline at the national level, so it is paramount to maintain its local and regional base. Once a powerful party at the local and regional levels, it suffered important losses during the Hollande presidency. Between 2008 and 2014, the PS lost 160 cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants that it had governed (11 of them were of more than 100,000 inhabitants). The PS also lost 15 regions out of 21 in the 2015 regional elections. These are worrying trends: given that the PS is currently no longer competitive at the national level, it ought to preserve a strong influence locally and regionally. The presidential contest may be the decisive election in French politics; nonetheless, it is impossible for a party to dominate French politics without solid local or regional anchoring. This has always been the RN's major problem. Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen have managed to get good results in the presidential elections, but their party has remained

1 From the 1980s onwards, an “elephant”, in the PS terminology, has designated an elected senior party cadre. It can be an apparatus (wo)man and/or a leader of a party faction.

←NEXT LEFT→

relatively marginal between presidential elections because it has not secured, so far, a strong position locally. This remark applies to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's LFI and even, to some extent, to Macron's Rebirth party (RE, Renaissance). The presidential movement still struggles to win major cities in municipal elections, as it has no strong local base. Should the PS make further losses locally soon, its position would be further weakened.



5

French socialists and European integration

Over the past 40 years, the question of Europe has played a major role in the redefinition of the French socialist identity and of the party's political objectives (Marlière, 2011). Firstly, in 1982, President Mitterrand decided against the pursuit of socialist policies at home, and for France's integration into the European Monetary System. Secondly, in 2004-2005, the national referendum on the European constitutional treaty led to an existential and fractious debate about the French socialists' relationship with the EU.

Under the presidencies of François Mitterrand, the PS adopted a rather uncritical stance of support for the EU, from the mid-1980s onward. This "honeymoon period" with Europe lasted about ten years. From the mid-1990s, the political orientation taken by the EU started to be challenged by various socialist factions. The party was split during internal and national campaigns on the constitutional treaty in 2004-2005. The politicisation of the debate and hostility towards the constitutional text was such that, in France, the PS had to tone down its unconditional pro-European position. The resounding "non" of the French people to the constitutional treaty in May 2005 compelled the PS to adjust its narrative on Europe to the new political mood in France. This political realignment has blurred the PS's traditional commitment to European integration.

5.1 A short-lived honeymoon with Europe

The adoption of the Single European Act in 1986 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 highlighted the radical *aggiornamento* of the French socialists in the space of a few years. The debate on the Maastricht Treaty was a turning point. Although the “no camp” was clearly in the minority in the early 1990s, the socialists, by then, had started to become disenchanted with European integration. Even the most devoted Europeanists in the PS would acknowledge that the main problem with the EU was that it had become fundamentally “neoliberal in nature” (Frank, 2005, p. 468). François Mitterrand himself toned down his marked preference for federalism before the referendum on the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. Challenged by left-wing (the PCF and Jean-Pierre Chevènement²) and neo-Gaullist *souverainistes* (Philippe Séguin and Charles Pasqua), the French president embraced an intergovernmentalist stance shortly before the vote. He argued that the European Council should always talk on behalf of Europe after consulting national member states. France also supported the use of the principle of subsidiarity. After an active campaign for the “yes vote”, Mitterrand narrowly won (51% to 49%). This small majority in favour of the Maastricht Treaty showed, in part, that France was no longer uncritically pro-European.

From the mid-1990s onwards, European integration ceased to be a “totemic reference” in the socialist landscape. For the French socialists,

2 Jean-Pierre Chevènement was an influential leader of the new PS from 1971 onwards. He served as a cabinet minister several times in the 1980s and 1990s. He resigned from the party in 1993 in opposition to the PS's pro-integration policies on the EU and founded the Citizens' Movement (MDC, Mouvement des Citoyens). Initially on the party's Marxist left, Chevènement steadily shifted to the right to eventually embrace deep Eurosceptic views and promote a brand of patriotic republicanism.

it was no longer taboo to question, challenge or even oppose certain policy orientations within the EU (Moscovici, 2004). The Socialist Left (GS, Gauche Socialiste), the main left-wing faction, criticised the French socialists' "naivety" on European Monetary Union (EMU). GS argued that the PS had been wrong to believe that economic integration would automatically pave the way for a "new space of common norms and laws", which was needed to build a "social Europe" (Mélénchon, 2007, pp. 78-79). The terms of the debate among socialists shifted to a new set of questions: What kind of Europe do socialists want? Is European integration going in the right direction for socialists? Is it compatible with the socialists' objective of a "social Europe" (i.e., a form of European integration that promotes growth, employment and social justice)?

5.2 No French Third Way on Europe

When he was prime minister (1997-2002), Lionel Jospin referred to the concept of a "federation of nation states", a term coined by Jacques Delors. This sounded less federalist than Joschka Fischer's bold speech calling for a "Federation for Europe" in May 2000. Jospin tried to make the "new" social democratic argument in a series of speeches (Jospin, 2002). On one hand, it was an attempt to provide a more "left-wing" version of Tony Blair's Third Way. On the other hand, it enabled Jospin to reassert the traditional socialist claim that Europe was a vehicle through which genuine social democratic initiatives could be pursued, allowing, in turn, the pursuit of socialist reforms at home (Clift, 2003). Jospin advocated for the promotion and expansion of the "European social model" (Jospin, 2002, p. 36) and called for a "genuine body of social law, establishing ambitious common standards", a "European social treaty" to be agreed upon by EU member states (Jospin, 2002, pp. 17-18).

In March 2002, barely a few months before the presidential election, Jospin committed France to increasing the retirement age by five years and to the liberalisation of gas and electricity services at the European Council meeting in Barcelona. The decision went down badly on the French left, as the socialist government did not consult its coalition's partners or the trade unions. Some saw it as more evidence of the antidemocratic and neoliberal nature of the EU, with the French socialists' acquiescence. In the end, the Jospin government did not find a French Third Way – that is, a project for a “social” and “political” Europe, which would differ from right-wing neoliberalism, as well as from Tony Blair's market-orientated and Atlanticist Europe (Marlière, 2007b). By the end of Jospin's five-year term, the European policies of the socialist government seemed, overall, to be in line with those of nonsocialist governments in Europe.

5.3 The politicisation of European integration

From 2004 onwards, heated debates on the European constitutional treaty undermined party unity. During the work of the European Convention, Arnaud Montebourg and Christian Paul – both in the left-wing faction New Socialist Party (NPS, Nouveau Parti socialiste), asked, in the name of the “socialist struggle for Europe”, that any future enlargement be preceded by a referendum. They argued that a Europe with 25 member states would mean the “end of the resistance to neoliberal globalisation and the triumph of Europe as a free market zone” (Montebourg and Paul, 2002). Later, the NPS leaders were even harsher in their appraisal of the EU, depicting it as “the Trojan horse of [economic] deregulation” (Montebourg, Dray and Peillon, 2002). In September 2002, New World (NM, Nouveau Monde),



another left-wing faction in the PS, was launched. It declared its opposition to the essentially “neoliberal course” of European integration and to further enlargement, which would arguably exacerbate the neoliberal nature of the EU. The party congress held in Dijon (on 16-18 May 2003) reflected the mood of defiance and disillusionment in relation to European integration. The majority draft resolution (under François Hollande’s party leadership) argued that a “re-orientation” of European integration, both institutional and political, was an “historic necessity”; otherwise, Europe would appear a “feeble, constraining and technocratic” project.

It was therefore not surprising that the treaty on the European constitution provoked passionate debates within the party in autumn 2004. Hollande unexpectedly decided to hold an internal referendum to let party members decide on the PS’s position regarding the constitutional treaty. It was a moment of party democracy, as, over a four-month period, the PS debated the issue. Party members voted in December 2004, and the “yes camp”, led by François Hollande, secured a relatively comfortable victory (58% to 42%). European integration had finally become a politicised question in the PS, in the sense that socialists did not simply look at the pace of the process of integration anymore, but also pondered about the direction taken by integration (i.e., its nature).

The stance of the *nonistes* (the partisans of the “no vote”) in the PS was vindicated in May 2005 at the national referendum. It is interesting to note that throughout the six-month campaign both camps kept referring positively to a “federalist” and “social Europe” and called for the consolidation of the supranational institutions in the EU. Critics who have accused the supporters of the “socialist no” of “Euroscepticism” or even “Europhobia” seem to have missed the point. It would be more accurate to describe “Euroscepticism” in the PS as “soft”, policy-

focused, rather than national interest based or ideologically socialist (Wagner, 2008, p. 258).

5.4 New tensions and appeasement

The feud over Europe was briefly reignited in the Spring of 2008, while the PS was busy drafting a new “Declaration of Principles” (a kind of party constitution that sets out the main values and objectives of the party). It is worth noting that reference to Europe did not even feature in the previous party declarations of 1905, 1946 and 1969. It was only included in the last draft of the 1990 declaration, despite strong opposition from Socialism & Republic (RS, Socialisme & République), a left-wing faction led by Jean-Pierre Chevènement (Hohl, 2008, p. 7). The 1990 text cautiously stated that the “PS is committed to European integration to give the nations that are part of it their full efficacy” (Maret and Houlou, 1990, p. 178). The declaration adopted in June 2008 more boldly asserted that the “Parti socialiste is a European party. It fully participates in the EU activities” (Parti socialiste, 2008). In this new declaration, the socialist commitment to Europe is absolute and unconditional, regardless of the policies or political orientation of the EU.

Since the departure from the PS of the main critics of European integration (all from left-wing factions), internal debates on the EU have calmed down. In 1993, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a sovereigntist in opposition to the Maastricht Treaty, left. In November 2008, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marc Dolez, two prominent advocates of the “no vote” in 2005, resigned from the PS. Shortly after, they created the Left Party (PG, Parti de Gauche), an organisation that is reminiscent of Die Linke, its German counterpart. A small splinter group of socialist activists joined the new party. As leader of LFI, today, Mélenchon remains one of the



strongest left-wing critics of the EU. Since Brexit, he has toned down his ambition of a “left-wing Frexit” and even of a “Plan B”, which would lead to France leaving the eurozone, should he be elected president. In 2017, Benoît Hamon, a former presidential candidate and from the party left, also left the PS. Hamon was never a partisan of Frexit or of leaving the eurozone, but he was critical of the EU’s economic and social priorities. Other main critics either quit politics altogether (Amaud Montebourg, a former finance minister during the Hollande presidency) or died (Henri Emmanuelli, a former party leader in the 1990s).

The PS, under the leadership of Olivier Faure, today remains cautiously but firmly devoted to European integration. Although the party is now downplaying the federalist stand of the Mitterrand years, it is certainly at ease in the mainstream of the Party of European socialists (PES). In domestic politics, the PS’s European stance is close to that of EELV. In contrast, Mélenchon’s LFI or the PCF can be described as largely critical of European integration and, to some extent, Eurosceptic. In the forthcoming 2024 European elections, the PS and EELV might jointly run a list of candidates. Both parties argue that their pro-European position is incompatible with LFI’s rather Eurosceptic stand. These left-wing parties have been part of the NUPES coalition since June 2022. The EU and other geopolitical issues, such as the war in Ukraine, are the main bones of contention between left-wing partners (see Chapter 6).

5.5 Critically pro-European

To sum up the question of the PS and Europe, it can be argued that, throughout the 1980s, an idiosyncratic “European ideology” progressively replaced the traditional socialist ideology. European integration became the “New Jerusalem”. This meant resolute faith in

the alleged “positive” effects of European integration. For that reason, neither the EU institutions nor its policies would be criticised by any socialists.

The goal of a “social Europe” has proved elusive: the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, which only contain very mild market-correcting policies, have disappointed French socialists. Disenchantment among a growing number of socialists replaced blind faith in the “European project”. Unhappy about the neoliberal drift of the EU, socialists have politicised the European question. Party debates are no longer about whether European integration should be pursued or not, but about the political nature of European integration and the content of EU policies.

The debate on the constitutional treaty shed light on existing tensions and contradictions within the party. An important minority rejected the text on the grounds that it “constitutionalised” neoliberalism. The internal vote and the national referendum that followed undermined another socialist belief, namely, the idea that traditional social democratic policies could be successfully promoted at the European level and that neoliberal globalisation could be regulated at the same level.

6

Is NUPES the answer to the PS's woes?

The launch of NUPES days before the two rounds of legislative elections on 12 and 19 June 2022 dramatically altered the political mood on the left. Until then, the prospects for the left looked quite bleak. Despite Jean-Luc Mélenchon's strong showing in the first round of the presidential race, the left had again failed to qualify for the second round. Disunited, the various parties of the left seemed destined for another crushing defeat in the legislative elections. This new "Union of the left" (after those of 1971-1978 and 1997-2002) poses new challenges for a much-weakened PS. It is necessary to understand the dynamics and *rappports de force* within NUPES to assess the PS's strength and weakness six years after the "2017 debacle".

6.1 The PS in a left-wing coalition

NUPES is a coalition that gathers together the main left-wing parties: the PS; LFI; PCF; EELV; as well as smaller parties such as Génération.s, Génération Écologie and the Nouveaux Démocrates. Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA, New anticapitalist party), the only anticapitalist party that was invited to join the coalition, opted out as it refused to participate in a coalition alongside the PS.

In the first instance, each party signed a bilateral agreement with LFI. On 19 May 2022, all one-to-one agreements merged in a comprehensive platform containing 650 policy proposals (NUPES, 2022). This is not the first time that the French left has formed such a broad electoral coalition. There are four historic precedents: 1924's Cartel des gauches (Socialists and Radicals); 1936's Popular Front (Socialists, Radicals and Communists, although the latter did not join the government); 1972's Common Programme (PS, PCF and Radical Movement of the Left); and 1997's Plural Left (PS, PCF, Citizens' Movement and EELV).

The new alliance's programme is of a radical reformist nature. It is in line with the radicalism of the Common Programme of the 1970s, although commentators have noted that it is less radical than the 1972 agreement (Thépot, 2022), as it does not call for a transitional break with capitalism. As Thomas Piketty put it, the united left has put "social and fiscal justice" back on the political agenda (its flagship policies roll back the retirement age to 60 and raise the minimum wage) (Piketty, 2022). The NUPES road map also sets out ecological planning and a "golden climate rule" designed to protect biodiversity, fight environmental pollution, and reduce greenhouse gases.

The NUPES partners are quite open about policy disagreements within the coalition. The document indeed flags up 33 "policy differences": for example, on Europe, where NUPES is committed to "redirecting the course of European integration towards more social justice, better environmental policies, and to defending public services". But each party's stance on Europe is stated. LFI is presented as the heir to those who fought and rejected the 2005 European constitutional treaty and as a movement that might "disobey" EU law, should the EU prevent a NUPES government from implementing its programme. Meanwhile, the EELV is said to "support



a federal Europe", and the PS is "strongly committed to pursuing European integration".

Programmatic diplomacy also applies to the sensitive topic of the war in Ukraine. In the run-up to the presidential election, the PS (*Le Monde*, 2022a) and EELV (*Le Monde*, 2022b) vehemently opposed the LFI's and PCF's stances on Ukraine. They were particularly alarmed at Mélenchon's pro-Russian views in the pre-war period (Graulle, 2022).

The programme states that the coalition is committed to "defending Ukraine's territorial integrity" and points to "Putin's crimes". This, overall, seems fine, but it is also terribly vague: how would a NUPES-led government support Ukraine? The programme remains evasive on this important issue. Furthermore, there is no mention of the strong disagreements between the coalition partners with regards to NATO: LFI thinks that NATO constitutes a major threat in the region and wants France out of it; whereas the PS is dedicated to NATO membership.

6.2 What led to the formation of NUPES?

A rather unsuccessful "popular primary election" was organised in January 2022 to select a single left-wing candidate for the presidential election. Christiane Taubira, a former justice minister during François Hollande's presidency, won it, but she was soon abandoned by her supporters. Instead of uniting the left, Taubira's ill-prepared and amateurish campaign was seen as bringing about further division to the left.

In the end, opinion polls were the actual primary election on the left. After a slow start, Mélenchon finished strongly, much like he did in the 2017 presidential election. He was narrowly defeated by Marine Le Pen for the second spot in the run-off. Mélenchon further personalised

an election that is, by its nature, very personalised. On two occasions, he has now run as a self-nominated candidate, while refusing to take part in a primary election of the left.

In both 2017 and 2022, Mélenchon benefitted from tactical voting. In the latest election, voters who envisaged voting for other left-wing candidates switched allegiance at the last minute and supported him (Martin, 2022). Some even disliked Mélenchon or were not in agreement with some of his policies, yet they voted tactically in the hope they could avoid a rerun of the 2017 contest between Macron and Le Pen. Left-wing voters were desperate to avoid the left's exclusion from the second round yet again.

When Mélenchon proposed an alliance to his left-wing rivals, he did so from a position of strength, after emphatically defeating all other left-wing candidates in the presidential first round. This meant that he could impose the tempo and nature of the coalition talks. Additionally, he managed to self-appoint himself as “prime minister in-waiting”, should NUPES win the legislative elections. He even asked voters to “elect” him as prime minister, a constitutional aberration, since only the president can appoint the prime minister.

6.3 Under the leadership of LFI

LFI is the dominant force within NUPES: with 325 candidates across France, Mélenchon's movement accounted for just over 56% of the NUPES candidates. On 1 May 2022, at the NUPES public launch in Aubervilliers, each left-wing leader was given some brief speaking time. Mélenchon spoke last and his speech lasted almost two hours. In the end, LFI was the main beneficiary of this electoral alliance. LFI has 79 MPs (up from 17 in 2017), the PS has 28 MPs (down from 31), PCF has 22 MPs (up from 16) and EELV has 23 MPs (up from 0).

NUPES represents a major tactical change for Mélenchon, who between 2016 and 2020 deliberately scorned the left and embraced a “populist” strategy (Marlière, 2019). He unsuccessfully tried to federate the “people” beyond the traditional left-right divide. This did not go to plan: during Macron’s first term, LFI did not fare well in the ballot box; and the movement only managed to get a few candidates elected across France.

Mélenchon badly needed the launch of NUPES to avoid being soundly defeated again by Macron’s party in the legislative elections (in 2017, LFI only secured the election of 17 MPs against 267 MPs belonging to Macron’s party). Yet, the other left-wing parties were also looking for an alliance that would enable them to salvage their parliamentary group. The PS, PCF and EELV fared so abysmally in the presidential election that, without such an agreement, they would all virtually lose most of their MPs.

What was initially a tactical retreat on the part of a weakened left has turned out to be a bit of a masterstroke. Voters were generally supportive of the agreement in June 2022, and there was real hope that the left might significantly increase its representation in the National Assembly, if not win the election outright. Ironically, the alliance marginally boosted the ailing fortunes of the PS, which has been fighting for its survival over the past six years. The NUPES agreement has given the PS a chance to shift to the left and somewhat reconnect with its lost electorate.

6.4 What’s next?

NUPES has 151 MPs altogether, but it does not form a parliamentary group. Once elected, the left-wing MPs joined their respective party groups. It means that, with 79 MPs, LFI is only the third parliamentary group behind Renaissance (Macron’s party) and Le Pen’s RN. With

28 MPs, the PS is only the sixth parliamentary group. This reflects the current weakness of the left. One should not lose sight of the fact that the total left-wing vote in France sat at around 30% at the end of Macron's first term. In comparison, right-wing and far-right votes totalled more than 60%. This shows that there is no outright left-wing majority in France at present, and it provides reason to temper expectations about what NUPES can achieve.

For the PS, this is a most unusual – and some would say uncomfortable – situation in many respects. Had the PS decided not to join NUPES, it would have lost a significant number of its 28 elected MPs. Olivier Faure, the party leader, knew it, and he fought to impose the NUPES agreement over internal opposition, which strongly rejected it. Some of his comrades have objected to it on the grounds that the PS is a party of government. It should not, therefore, be part of an alliance under the leadership of LFI, a left populist movement. This is indeed a unique situation in the European left at large. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's abrasive style and his unwillingness to compromise with allies and adversaries are problematic for many socialists. LFI's Eurosceptic stance and Mélenchon's initial support of dictatorial regimes (the Chávez regime in Venezuela, China against Taiwan's independence, Putin's Russia against NATO and the USA, etc.), convince many socialists that the PS and LFI are miles apart when it comes to human rights and the question of self-determination.

In January 2023, 23,759 members re-elected Olivier Faure for a second term as the PS leader. However, Faure won by a whisker, with 50.83% share of the vote. There was only a 393-vote margin between Faure and Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol, his main opponent. The vote took place under acrimonious circumstances (Escalona, 2023). The opposition to Faure initially refused to concede defeat. Mayer-Rossignol, who received Hollande's support, is not against the NUPES



alliance, but he is sceptical of it. He was backed by a third group in the party led by Carole Delga, president of the Occitanie region, who is deeply hostile to NUPES. In the 2022 presidential election, Delga endorsed Anne Hidalgo, who is also sceptical of NUPES. Had Faure lost the leadership election, the future of NUPES would probably have been in the balance. The new socialist leadership would have certainly decided to leave the left coalition altogether, and other parties, such as PCF and EELV, would probably have followed suit.

6.5 Sociology of the socialist electorate

A comprehensive poll carried out with LFI, PS and EELV voters gives useful information to understand what the role of the PS could be in the NUPES coalition (Bristielle, 2022). Firstly, socialist voters are older than LFI or EELV sympathisers. In the short term, this could be an advantage, as older voters tend to vote more than younger ones. In the longer term, an ageing electorate may prove a major problem for the PS. The socialist electorate is also more middle class than LFI's voters, who are of a more popular background. Secondly, the three electorates are quite close when it comes to major political issues (retirement age, funding of the welfare state, state interventionism in the economy, degrowth to protect the environment, immigration, adoption of children by same-sex couples), even if LFI voters tend to advocate for more radical or "left-wing" measures. The PS and EELV voters differ from LFI supporters on their assessment of globalisation and European integration: LFI voters have a less positive take on those issues than socialist sympathisers. Geopolitical issues and Europe are indeed the main bones of contention between LFI and the other components of NUPES. Socialist voters also think that NUPES should compromise

more with the government's proposals in parliament. LFI voters radically disagree with that. The findings of this study have been corroborated by another academic piece of research (Rouban, 2022).

According to a study by the Jean Jaurès Foundation (Bristielle, 2023), socialist sympathisers are more left-wing than the national average on socio-economic issues (taxation of the rich, state interventionism, workers' rights) as well as on environmental and societal issues (pro-immigration and pro-surrogacy rights for same-sex parents). They remain more supportive of European integration than the national average, and they consider that globalisation is a chance for France. The majority of socialist voters think that LFI is a party which "stirs up violence" (56%) and is "dangerous for democracy" (51%). They also disapprove of LFI's die-hard attitude in the National Assembly in opposition to Macron's majority.

These results underline a deep schism within NUPES. Socialist voters do not regard LFI, currently the main party in the alliance, as a natural partner. They even point to the "dangerousness" of Mélenchon's movement. In the longer term, this may prove a major problem for the coalition. In the aftermath of the murder of a young racialised person by the police in Nanterre, in June 2002, riots erupted across France. Mélenchon and LFI, together with some EELV officials, vehemently criticised police brutality, and the police's racial profiling of youngsters from ethnic minorities. The PS and PCF refused to join them, and publicly condemned LFI for refusing to appeal for calm when violence on the streets and looting started. This is just one of the many examples of conflict amongst NUPES partners (others include the Russian war against Ukraine, European integration, LFI's "radicality strategy" in opposition to Macron or the electoral bargaining before each election). Each new dispute brings the breakup of NUPES closer (Cassini, 2023).



7

Conclusion

Much weakened by dramatic electoral losses in 2017, the PS has not regained the dominant position it used to enjoy on the left or in the French party system since then. As in 2017, its future looks uncertain, if not bleak.

Like all social democratic parties, the PS's decline is, to some extent, structural and subject to external factors. "New social democracy" in the 21st century has experienced a "great transformation" (Moschonas, 2002). In the end, it seems that capitalism has transformed social democracy more than it has succeeded in transforming capitalism. From the 1980s onwards, social democracy has experienced a continuous process of "de-social democratisation", affecting every aspect of these parties: their ideology; programmes; organisation; and electorates. The French PS is no exception to the rule.

Since the 1990s, the PS has appealed to younger and female voters, as well as urban professionals, more than most other European parties. Consequently, many blue-collar workers have started supporting far-right parties (FN/RN), the populist left (LFI) or they have stopped voting altogether. This trend is general across Europe (Benedetto, Hix and Mastrococco, 2020), but it is particularly strong in France. François Hollande's rightward shift on socioeconomic issues between 2012 and 2017 seems to validate the "neoliberal contamination thesis", which emphasises social democracy's neoliberal turn, and the resulting loss

of trust in social democracy, especially among working-class voters (Bandau, 2021). The PS, of all European social democratic parties, has typically shown that it has a “mobilisation problem”, as it struggles to convince its traditional constituencies (the working class and public sector workers) to vote for it at elections (Bremer and Rennwald, 2022).

The PS is now uncompetitive when it comes to the presidential and legislative elections, the two main elections in France. The PS may still be a powerhouse in the local and regional echelons of French politics, but this does not translate into influence and success at the national level. Should this situation persist, the PS would then lose its unofficial status of “party of government” for good. One may contend that voters trust experienced socialist mayors or regional councillors during a period of political realignment and instability. However, they no longer regard the PS as the main party of opposition at the national level. Evidence of this is that they emphatically rejected its last two presidential candidates.

Since 2017, the PS has been between a rock and a hard place: on its left, it is dominated by Mélenchon’s LFI; and on its right, by Macron’s Renaissance party (Clift and McDaniel, 2017). The success of both parties has a lot to do with the PS’s own setbacks. LFI has attracted a significant fraction of former socialist voters who felt “betrayed” by Hollande’s shift to the right during his presidency. Macron’s candidacy and election in 2017 was rendered possible by internal conflicts in the PS during Hollande’s term. Those who felt that Hamon’s candidacy was too left wing, or who now regard an alliance with Mélenchon as “illegitimate”, found refuge in Macron’s party.

Both LFI and Renaissance are “personal parties”, that is, one-man movements that were created by Mélenchon and Macron to help them win the presidential election. These two parties intentionally have few

members. They rely on the charismatic figures of their founders and on centralising resources that replace the collective and legal-rational party structure (Calise, 2015). Mélenchon has declared that he would not run again in 2027, and Macron cannot run again after completing two terms. It remains to be seen whether these two parties will survive their founders' departure. This may give the PS a lifeline to recover some of its lost voters. For that, it would have to appeal to voters who want the PS to shift left, and moderate voters who do not want the party to be part of a coalition that is dominated by LFI. To combine the two types of demands will not be easy.

The PS has also lost three quarters of its members since 2012 (down from 170,000 before Hollande's election to less than 40,000 today). The party lacks rank-and-file activists on the ground, but it is also impoverished, as it has received far less public funding from the State since 2017. In France, political parties receive grants that depend on the proportion of the vote and seats won by a party in the last parliamentary election. Anne Hidalgo received less than 5% of the votes in the last presidential election, which is the threshold for the state to reimburse a substantial amount of all campaign costs. One of the first decisions made by Olivier Faure, as new party leader in 2018, was to sell the plush PS headquarters in the centre of Paris and move them to a more modest building in the outskirts of the capital.

The PS renewal will not only depend on further realignments to its left (LFI) and to its right (Renaissance). It will also be conditional on the PS's ability to form a new generation of officials who are media savvy and have a good command of their brief. Those qualities seem to be in short supply in the party at present. The main party officials (including Olivier Faure, the leader) are untried and relatively unknown to the public. LFI's breakthroughs in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections were due to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's oratory skills; his strong

political convictions and an ability to engage the electorate at rallies, on television or on social media. In terms of public image, the PS must rebuild virtually everything from scratch.

Politically and programmatically, the PS will have to decide if it stands on the social democratic left, or if it is now a centre-left party, which can form coalition governments with centre-right or liberal parties. The party debate about the European constitutional treaty in 2005 showed that these two camps could hardly coexist in the PS. The left-wing factions have all departed from the party. However, conflicts about the party line and its policies are not over. The internal feud restarted in June 2022 when Faure narrowly convinced the party executive that the PS should join NUPES. The decision did not go down well with the party minority. It means that the PS still does not know exactly what its policies are and where it stands politically. It affirms that it is a social democratic, ecological and feminist party, but it remains unclear which policies it would implement if it participated in a left-wing government. The NUPES programme is largely a carbon copy of Mélenchon's presidential manifesto. This is obviously a point of concern for the party's centre and its right-wing.

The French PS's downfall should give food for thought to all social democratic parties in Europe, whether they are in office or in opposition. Dominant on the left and one of the main political parties not so long ago, it is now a shadow of its former self. The electoral "car crash" of 2017 had multiple causes. One of them, maybe the main one, was that voters abandoned the party *en masse* because they felt that it could hardly be distinguished from a centre-right liberal party. This political spot has been occupied by Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party since 2017.

The past few years have been full of underinvestment and cuts to French public services. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, inequalities



have increased, inflation is high, and salaries are stagnant. Studies have shown that rightward economic movements of social democratic parties significantly reduce their support under higher levels of income inequalities, especially when they are combined with rightward socio-cultural movements (Polacko, 2022), as it is the case in France (Marlière, 2023). They also demonstrate that there are no massive voter flows from social democratic parties to right-wing populists or the far-right parties (Häusermann et al., 2021). Disenfranchised social democratic voters swift allegiance to green or populist left parties or to mainstream centre-right parties. They also abstain from voting. Again, the PS is a case in point.

In short, there is indeed a lot to do for a social democratic party in France. Doing little or simply consolidating some of the past reforms of the right spectacularly backfired between 2012 and 2017. Hollande's presidency may be seen as the "Third Way moment" for the PS. But the French version never lived up to the British one. Hollande came to power without Blair's powerful narrative and new ideas. He lacked the support of a united party, and he did not enact the social reforms that New Labour was able to implement. In 2012, the economic situation was also less favourable for social democrats than it was in the late 1990s. Now is the time for reconstruction. The PS has hard choices to make to convince the electorate that it can be trusted again to enhance social justice and civil liberties in France.

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Glossary

- CGT: Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Labour).
- EELV: Europe Écologie Les Verts (Europe, Ecology, The Greens).
- FN: Front national (National Front).
- GS: Gauche socialiste (Socialist Left).
- LFI: La France insoumise (Unbowed France).
- LR: Les Républicains (The Republicans).
- LREM: La République en marche (The Republic Onwards).
- MDC: Mouvement des citoyens (Citizen's Movement).
- MRG: Mouvement des radicaux de gauche (Radical Movement of the Left).
- NM: Nouveau monde (New World).
- NPA : Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist party).
- NPS: Nouveau parti socialiste (New Socialist party).
- NUPES: Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale (New Popular, Ecological and Social Union).
- PASOK: Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (Panhellenic Socialist Movement).
- PCF: Parti communiste français (French Communist party).
- PES: Party of European Socialists.
- PR: Parti radical (Radical party).
- PS: Parti socialiste (Socialist party).
- RE: Renaissance (Rebirth).

←NEXT LEFT→

- RN: Rassemblement national (National Rally).
- SFIO: Section française de Internationale ouvrière (French Section of Workers' International).
- SR: Socialisme & République (Socialism & Republic).



Biography



Philippe Marlière is a professor of French and European Politics at University College London (UK). He was a Research Fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) between 1989 and 1994. Philippe holds a PhD degree in Social and Political Studies from the European University Institute in Florence. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the collective memory of French socialism. (*La Mémoire socialiste 1905-2007. Sociologie du souvenir politique en milieu partisan*, L'Harmattan, 2007). He was awarded the 2007 Chair of Politics at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in recognition of his work on European social democracy. Philippe Marlière researches political ideologies, party politics and the French Left. He is currently writing a book on the republican ideology in France.