

French connection by Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Éloi Laurent
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Nicolas Sarkozy has been given a difficult mandate by a record turnout of voters - to return *égalité* and *fraternité* to France.

One puzzling and often overlooked feature of the France that elected Nicolas Sarkozy as its new president - and that is now poised to give his political allies a powerful parliamentary mandate - is its mix of private optimism and public pessimism.

Consider this: France claims to have the highest birth-rate in the European Union (just under two children per woman), even ahead of booming Ireland. Of course, that rate alone is not enough to sustain France's current population, but it's far stronger than its European neighbours and almost equal to that of the US.

Yet, despite this, Eurobarometer polls repeatedly show that the French are the most pessimistic of all Europeans when it comes to their country's future. How can it be that people who are so negative about their common future as a nation go about confidently building their private futures within their families?

Indeed, strained by decades of governmental failure to curb massive unemployment, the French are nowadays often perceived as having retired from the political sphere to concentrate on their lives and leisure. Museums, gardening, clubs of all sorts are blossoming in today's France. Private associations, it seems, have picked up where political parties and trade unions have left off.

But if the French have turned their backs on the public sphere, how are we to make sense of the record-high participation in the recent presidential election, when more than 85% of turned out to vote in both rounds? How do we explain the passion aroused by the campaign and by Sarkozy himself, including the massive affirmation he received in the parliamentary election?

Political fervour, it seems, has not vanished in the land of Rousseau and Danton. So the truth must lie elsewhere: the French are not hopeless about politics; they are simply waiting for a genuine leader.

As a matter of fact, a case can be made that the French will never come to believe that the state lacks power, globalisation or no globalisation. The French still expect greater things from their government than from an integrated Europe or the boundless world.

Yes, the French are incorrigible lovers of the welfare state (they are not the only ones). And Sarkozy seems to understand this instinctively. His agenda appears to aim at domestic liberalisation - moving beyond the 35-hour week, ending the special pension regimes accorded to particular professions, increasing incentives to work and gain wealth.

But it also seeks protection from the dizzying effects of globalisation, which probably will mean strong support for the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, scepticism toward

further trade liberalisation and the will to improve European Union's economic government.

Nevertheless, precisely because they care about the future of their numerous children, the French are much more amenable to some wise reforms than most commentators (and politicians) generally assume. Secondary and higher education are rightly near the top of the agenda list of the new government. But so are measures aimed at harnessing the state to efforts to encourage entrepreneurship and boost economic dynamism such as public guarantees for housing and start-ups, and fiscal rebate for investment in small enterprises.

France is also in desperate need of a reality check on the nature of its current cultural diversity. And no one should forget that, despite his campaign rhetoric and his apparent unpopularity with many immigrants, Sarkozy himself is an immigrant's son who favours bold affirmative action policies. Besides, the nomination of a woman with a north-African accent as minister of justice made that clear from the start.

Most French understand that their public spaces - the labour market, the workplace, housing, and educational institutions - are corroded by discrimination. France's impoverished suburbs, the notorious banlieues, make the ideal of fraternité sound like an insult on top of an injury. There is no greater task for Sarkozy than to open, from the inside, all doors to the offspring of others who, like his father, immigrated to France.

So make no mistake about it. Nicolas Sarkozy has not been elected to adapt France to an elusive globalisation. His mandate is much more demanding: he must reconcile France's public interests with its private passions.

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