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# **Electoral Abstention and Voters' Cognitive Environment: The Case of France**

François Facchini<sup>1</sup> and Louis Jaeck<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract:**

Relying on a qualitative approach based on French opinion poll surveys, this article demonstrate that electoral abstention occurs because voters do not perceive any ideological differences between leading political parties, thus believing that none of them could change any political outcomes and improve their daily lives. And also because voters perceive the political class as powerless and incompetent to improve the social and economic situation (e.g. low economic growth and high unemployment). Then, the crisis of political representation has its roots in a specific voters' cognitive context where the lack of ideological differentiation of the main political platforms increases voters' costs of making informed choices.

Key words: electoral abstention, cognition, stigmatisation, beliefs, ideology

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## 1. Introduction

It has been recognized that high voter participation gives legitimacy to those in power; it increases the authority of the democratic system as a whole and promotes stability (Franklin, 2004; Powell, 1986). In contrast, increasing rate of abstention is a sign of apathy toward the democratic system (Dettrey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Such democratic deficit is a widespread phenomenon amongst major liberal democracies (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Magni-Berton, 2012). The French democracy does not make exception to the rule and it has exhibited a growing trends of electoral abstention.<sup>i</sup> From 1876 to 1981, voters' abstention in parliamentary elections fluctuated between 15 per cent and 30 per cent. In addition, since 1986 it has increased faster: 42 per cent in 2012 compared to 22 cent in 1986. Abstention in parliamentary elections reached its peak in 2012 with a rate of 43 per cent. Its lowest level occurred during the April 24, 1928 election with a rate of 16.21 per cent. During the period between 1924-1936, four elections occurred for which the year 1928 abstention rate was historically low, or between 15 per cent and 16 per cent.<sup>ii</sup> Until 1986, the average rate was around 25 per cent. One out of four voters had not cast his vote during that period. However, the level of electoral abstention differs from one type of election to another. The average of abstentions rate between 1958 and 2012 are different for the different type of elections<sup>iii</sup>: Presidential election (1958-2012), 19.73%, Municipal election (1965-2014), 26.5%, Legislative election (1965-2012), 28.66%, Cantonal election (1961-2011), 39.43%, Regional election (1986-2015), 41.5% and European election (1979-2014) 51.6%. A general trend towards increasing abstention rates may be observed for all elections. In addition, by computing the difference between the abstention rate of the first and the last election during the fifth republic, we observe that the gap between the abstention rate of the first and last Presidential election (1965-2012) is 5.32, 14,65 for Municipal election; 12,18 for Cantonal election, 16,01 for European election, 23,9 for Legislative election and 26,98 for Regional election.<sup>iv</sup>

In addressing this phenomenon the literature on electoral sociology has studied the effect of variables such as age, occupation, and education level (Blais, 2000; Leighley, 1995; Franklin, 2004). In France for instance, electoral abstainers, on average,

are elderly or young, have little education, are not homeowners, generally do not belong to the civil service or to the agricultural sector, and usually live in their place of residence for long time (Abrial et al. 2003; Muxel, 2007). The central hypothesis of this approach is to identify the level of political and economic integration of the voters, which in turn determines their participation. It has been also widely accepted that French abstention results from a deep crisis of political representation (Muxel, 2002; 2007). However, the underlying mechanisms of such crisis of representativeness remain to the best of our knowledge under investigated.

Relying on a qualitative approach based on French opinion poll surveys, the paper fills this gap by discussing the voters' cognitive context and their perception of the efficiency of democracy. We demonstrate that electoral abstention occurs because of the following factors: First, voters do not perceive any ideological differences between leading political parties, thus believing that none of them could change any political outcomes and improve their daily lives. Second, and as a consequence, they perceive the political class as powerless and incompetent to improve the social and economic situation (e.g. low economic growth and high unemployment). The crisis of political representation has its roots in a specific voters' cognitive context where the lack of ideological differentiation of the main political platforms increases voters' costs of making informed choices. Following Boudon (2003; 2010)'s cognitive approach of rationality, we argue that it is rational to abstain from voting in such a context. Third, they consider voting a duty if they believe that elected politicians represent them in the political scene (Boudon, 1997). Electoral participation thus serves as a signal to reveal the value that voters attribute to the democratic system. However, as soon as they doubt that politicians represent their values and expectations, they tend to stay away from polls. In that context, the cultural norm, "*voting as a duty to defend the democracy*" (Down, 1957), tends to disappear, and that process is strengthened when stigmatization mechanisms that target citizens who abstain from voting become less effective. Interestingly, by discussing the roots of the crisis of political representation, we provide the theoretical foundations that support empirical results of a non-linear relationship between economic crisis and abstention. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section 2 reviews the existing literature that has attempted to explain French electoral abstention. Based on opinion

polls surveys, section 3 describes our contribution. Section 4 provides concluding comments.

## **2. The French electoral abstention: the explanations**

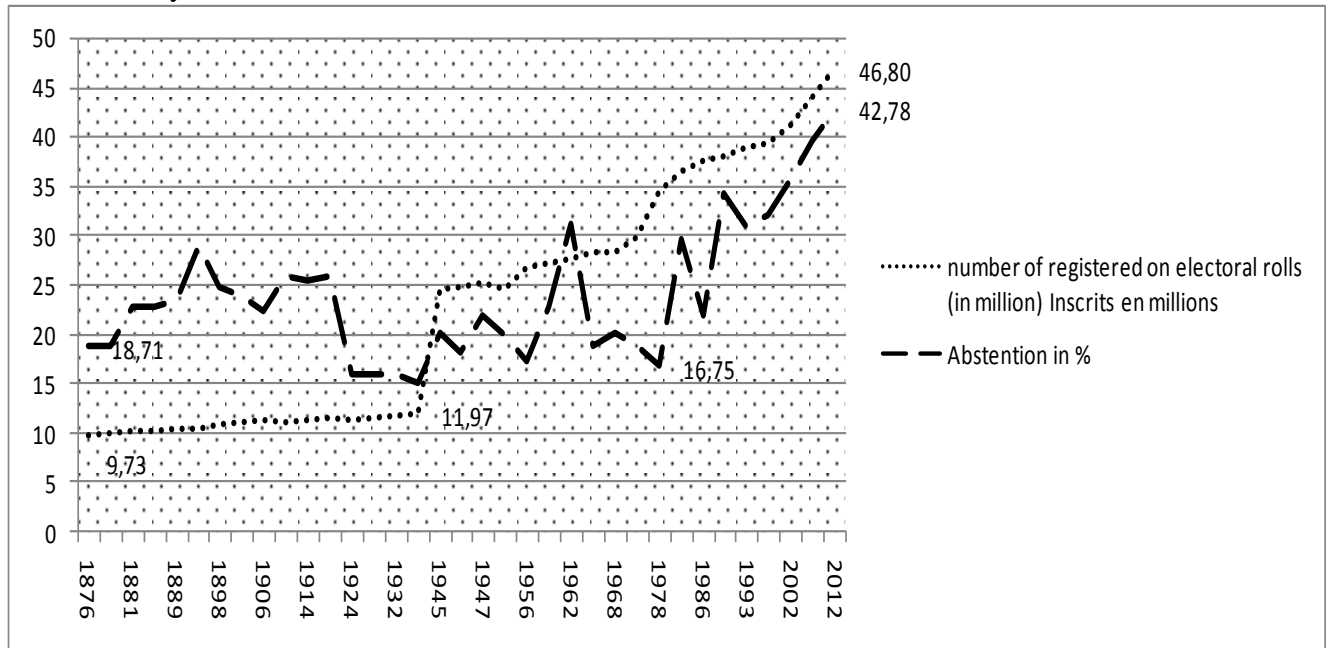
Since the 1980s, the effect of turnout for the well-functioning of a democracy have given rise to a large body of political science literature in both American Politics (Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) and Comparative Politics (Geys, 2006; Wattenberg, 2002). These studies focus on institutional determinants of turnout, such as compulsory voting laws or the type of electoral system, and contextual factors such as the decisiveness of the electoral race.<sup>v</sup> For instance, Powell's (1986) empirical analysis on industrial nations finds a positive correlation between voters' turnout and institutional variables such as compulsory voting, a proportional electoral system, and more registered citizens. Subsequent studies by Jackman (1987) and Jackman and Miller (1995), which also focus on western industrialized countries confirm Powell's analysis and add that close races and unicameral system enhances a high level of turnout. Not to mention the literature in the field of electoral sociology that has studied the effect of variables such as age, occupation, and education level (Blais, 2000; Leighley, 1995; Franklin, 2004).<sup>vi</sup> In this body of research, electoral participation depends on the level of economic and political integration of citizens. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast literature that have addressed the determinants of electoral participation in old and young democracies. Instead, this section reviews the scholarly contributions that have attempted to explain the growing trend in the French electoral abstention. Existing literature begins with the seminal contribution of Lancelot (1968) who made the distinction between forced and voluntary abstention contrary to the contemporary literature. Forced abstention counts all voters who were unable to vote for reasons independent of their wishes. Illness, childbirth, or exceptional travel can explain forced abstention. All measures that allow citizens to cast their vote without being present on an election day limit this type of abstention.<sup>vii</sup> It has been further established that voluntary abstention in France may depend on the size of the electorate (Downs, 1957; Lancelot, 1968), the number of electoral constituencies that do not exhibit an absolute majority in the first

round of an election, i.e. uncertainty in election results (Lancelot, 1968; Fauvelle-Aymar and Francois, 2006), the voting rule (Lancelot, 1968), the level of corruption of the political class (Stockzemer et al., 2013), and the state of the economy (Rosenstone, 1982; Radcliff, 1992; Guérin and Richard, 1995; Hetherington, 1998). We detail the various arguments throughout the following paragraphs and illustrate each of them with a French stylized fact.<sup>viii</sup>

## **2.1 The size of the electorate**

If voters behave as the model of perfect rationality would predict, it is likely that the increase in the size of the electorate leads them to abstain from voting. Indeed, one might expect that, on average, local elections would have a higher turnout compare to presidential elections. This is because the probability of being decisive is objectively higher in local elections than in national elections where the number of votes needed to elect a candidate is much more important. Figure 1 tends to confirm the idea that the larger the size of the electorate, the stronger the rate of electoral abstention.<sup>ix</sup> It also shows that while the evolution of the number of registered voters has increased regularly since 1876 (with a jump in 1946), the date at which the right to vote was extended to women evidences the volatility of the rate of electoral abstention (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Evolution of the Number of Registered Voters and the Rate of Abstention in Parliamentary Elections



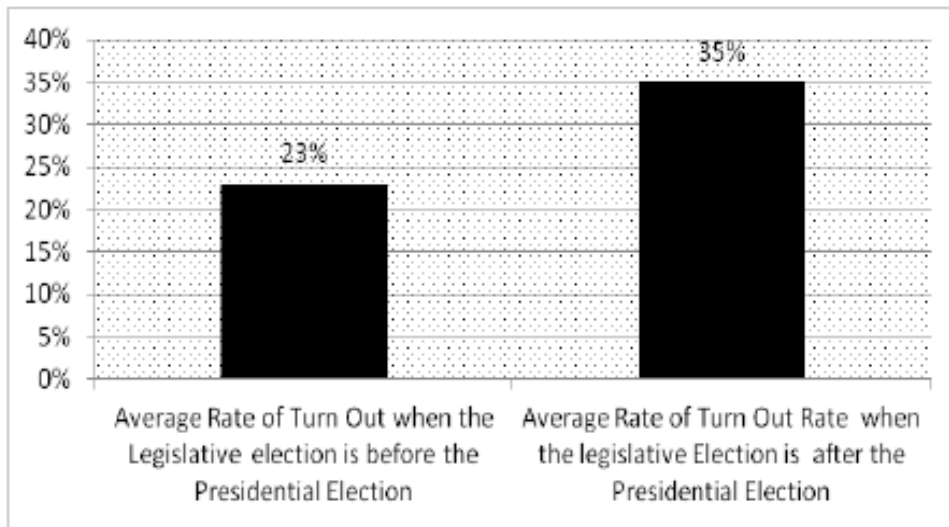
Sources: Lancelot (1968), pp.119

## 2.2 The uncertainty of elections' results

The uncertainty surrounding an election is often presented as being at the origin of voters' mobilization. For instance, we observe that parliamentary elections occurring immediately after a presidential election are quite often not the focus of high stakes, as they only confirm the result of the presidential elections. Each time, there is then a significant increase in the rate of electoral abstention. This is shown by a simple comparison of averages between the rate of abstention of the parliamentary elections following the presidential elections, and the rate of the elections that took place immediately afterwards (Figure 2). It can also reinforce the idea that too much electoral consultation has a negative effect on turnout (Lancelot 1968, p.128). Similarly, following the Downsian Closeness Hypothesis (DCH, Matsusaka and Palda, 1993), many studies dealt with the relation between the expected closeness of the ballot and the actual turnout. Theoretically, this relation seems well grounded and is based on two distinct effects. The first is the direct impact of closeness on the probability to be a decisive voter. The second

is the indirect influence of closeness through the mobilization efforts of the parties and candidates. The French legislative election provides interesting empirical support for that purpose, as it is a two-round single-member district voting system. For instance, using aggregate electoral district data for the 1997 French parliamentary elections Fauvelle-Aymar and Francois (2006) show that closeness has both significant and positive effect on turnout: the closer the ballot is on the first round, the more that registered voters decide to participate in the second round.

**Figure 2** Comparison between the Average of the Abstention in the Parliamentary Elections Taking Place after the Presidential Elections and the Elections not Taking Place after Such Elections (1958/2016)



Sources: *ibid.* Figure 1.

### 2.3 The voting rule

The voting rule is also an important element of the discussion. Recall that the key election under the third Republic was the parliamentary election because it was a Republic of Members of Parliament (MEPs) (Lancelot 1968, p.148). With the advent of the Fifth Republic, the system moves towards the Republic of the Presidents (Lancelot 1968, p.148). It is the presidential election which becomes the major election, exhibiting a lower electoral abstention rate (Figure 2). However, this argument should be nuanced



because the fourth Republic maintains a parliamentary system where the President has no major political role. Nevertheless, it has recorded rates of abstention 4 to 5 points higher than observed at the end of the Third Republic. Two explanations may be proposed to account for this development: first, the widespread use of the right to vote to women, and second the change of the voting rule. Concerning the latter, some authors have argued that the introduction of a proportional representation promotes electoral abstention (Girod, 1953, pp.349–376; Lancelot, 1968, p.171). This effect is observed for European and regional elections, it does not account, however, for the continuous increase of abstention during the Fifth Republic (Table 1). In addition, the fact that the level of abstention is higher in proportional representation partly contradicts the general idea that political systems where political competition is strong and governments are accountable, are favourable to voter turnout (Powell, 1986; Jackman and Miller, 1995).

**Table 1** Abstention and Method of Voting: Proportional Representation versus Election by Majority

	Presidential	Municipal	Legislative	Cantonal	Regional	European
Scrutin	Majoritary For a single candidate	Proportional With a premium	Majoritary For a single candidate	Majoritary for a single candidate with two rounds	Proportional	Proportional
Abstention	19.73	25.57	28.66	39.43	40	50.98

Sources: Author's calculation from election results in: Les Cahiers de l'Histoire n ° 64 - March 1967, les élections françaises de 1789 à nos jours, by Jean Guiffan (for the years 1871-1965); France-Politique, <http://www.france-politique.fr>

## 2.4 The corruption

Corruption of politicians is usually associated with more electoral abstention as it thwarts voters who lose confidence in their elected representatives. This effect would be all the stronger as the media systematically broadcasts information arguing in favour of corrupt elected officials. Stockzemer et al. (2013) show for a set of developed and developing countries the existence of such relationships over the period 1984-2009. Interestingly, they highlight that while corruption has been present since the dawn of politics, it has increasingly become the focus of media and public attention during the past thirty years.

Consequently, this amplified attention may have increased citizens' awareness of corruption, contributing to a loss of trust in politicians or in the political system in general. The fact that French voters perceive their political class as being increasingly corrupt, and that corruption cases periodically cause peaks of distrust towards it, confirm this argument.<sup>x</sup>

## **2.5 The effect of economic crisis**

The literature related to the impact of economic crisis on voter turnout is ambiguous. In times of crisis, the ineffectiveness of economic policies would generate two contradictory effects. This inefficiency leads to more mobilization if voters believe they can force the elected government to change policy through their vote (Schlozman and Verba, 1979). In this view, people are encouraged to vote, protest or lobby because they blame the government for their economic hardships and wish to manifest their discontent regarding the government's policies. In that sense, economic crisis generate greater electoral participation. Adverse economic conditions may also have the opposite effect leading citizens to ignore politics as well as how governments act against economic turmoil. This is the withdrawal effect. The reason is that people enduring hard economic conditions face serious problems; they therefore tend to focus their efforts and attention on solving them and, as a result, pay less attention to politics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Radcliff (1992) introduce the idea that social security programs matter. In developed countries where social security programs are established, adverse economic conditions depress voter turnout. Conversely, in developing countries, the lack of social security system exposes voters more robustly to bad economic outcomes, explaining why they tend to participate more strongly in political life. In the spirit of Radcliff (1992) and Rosenstone (1982)'s analysis, Braconnier (2010) supports the view of a withdrawal effect which point to a linear relationship between the French electoral abstention and economic crisis. Martins and Veiga (2013) have gone further and have challenged this view by arguing in favour of a non-linear relationship. They assume that in good and bad times the mobilization effect dominates, as voters may wish to express their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with economic performance, while situations in which the economy is neither too hot nor too cold may cause the withdrawal effect to be dominant.

These effects are consistent with the theory of expressive voting, according to which voting may be motivated by concerns other than the outcome of the election. Although an individual voter knows that his vote has virtually no chance of being decisive in a mass election, he may wish to vote however, in order to express his satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the economic performance achieved by the incumbent government. Expressive voting may vary with economic conditions and be more salient in good and bad times (Hillman, 2010). Based on a Portuguese data set related to legislative and municipal elections, they show that electoral abstention is weaker when economic conditions are very good or very bad, and stronger when economic outcomes are neither good nor bad. Also, using the Geys and Heyndels' (2006) electoral model when applied to Flemish municipal elections, they confirm the existence of a non-linear relationship between economic crisis and electoral abstention. This ambiguity associated with the effect of economic crisis on abstention rate is also observable with the French case. Indeed, the effect of the 1929 and 1975 crisis on abstention recorded at parliamentary elections is very different from that of the 1993 and 2008 crisis. The 1929 and 1975 crisis were associated with the lowest level of abstention throughout the period 1876-2012, whereas those of 1993 and 2008 exhibit the opposite (Figure 1).

All of these studies contribute to highlight the multiple determinants of the French abstention phenomenon. The political science literature has also repeatedly argued that the growing trends of the French electoral abstention over the last thirty years goes hand in hand with a crisis of political representation (Muxel, 2002; 2007). However, the sources of the latter remain under analysed. In particular, the voter's cognitive context and its perception of the efficiency of democracy play an important role in explaining such democratic deficit. In the next section we address this challenge and demonstrate that if voters are unable to discern any differences between programs of the main political parties, and as a result believe that the political class is powerless to improve the state of the economy, they have incentives to abstain from voting.

### **3. Voters' cognitive environment, political crisis and electoral abstention**

Many studies have shown that voters have relatively low knowledge of economic policies and their effects (Converse, 1964; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Deli et al., 1996; Hardin,

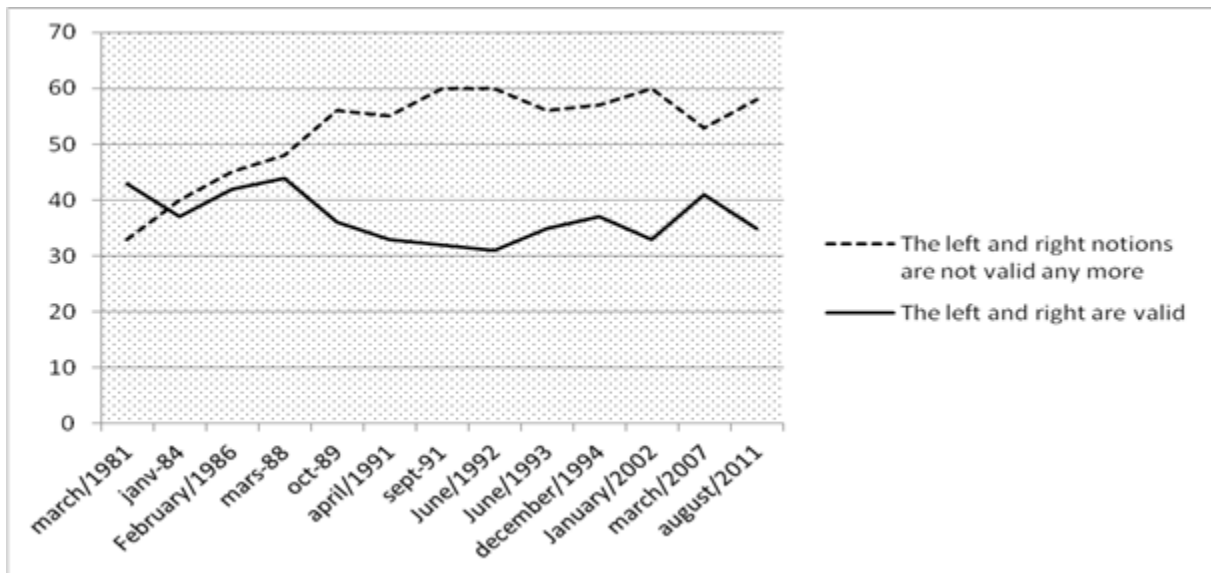
2006; Facchini 2017). In this context of ignorance, the ideology of political parties plays the role of a signal that reduces voters' costs of acquiring political information. This signal is a shortcut to understand political debates and public policy choices (MacDonald and Rabinowitz, 1993). Thus, in such a context of rational ignorance, ideology becomes a way to anticipate and understand the government's decisions.<sup>xi</sup> In a world where left-wing and right-wing parties are clearly differentiated, specific policies are associated with parties' political programs. Yet, the absence of ideological divide distorts this signal and increases voters' costs of acquiring political information. The absence of ideological divide is, however, less damaging for voters with high human capital than for others. Gradually, the less informed voters are squeezed out of the political debate, because they no longer understand it. This is the reason why electoral abstainers are usually individuals with low human capital (Abrial et al., 2003; Franklin, 2004). Therefore, the voters' cognitive environment is central to understand the underlying mechanism of electoral abstention. By focusing on the French case we show in the subsequent paragraphs that in a political world full of ideological similarities, acquiring political information about policy debates is costly, thus feeding a political crisis and ultimately abstention.<sup>xii</sup> In such a context, we highlight that it is rational to abstain from voting in a Boudon (2003;2010)'s sense of cognitive rationality. In doing so, we provide the theoretical foundations that supports empirical results of a non-linear relationship between economic crisis and abstention. Reputation effects play also a crucial role in addressing comprehensively the abstention phenomenon. The fall of stigmatization costs associated with non-participation is another channel that incentivizes citizens to stay away from polls.

### **3.1 The argument of economic crisis revisited**

Recent French political history is highly instructive in addressing the cognitive aspect of voters' turnout. In particular, it shows to what extent the effect of economic crisis on electoral abstention is conditioned by the voters' cognitive context, and especially by their assessment of the ideological divide of leading political parties. Indeed, it is striking to notice that the political situation during the 1975 economic crisis resembles that of the crisis in 1936. The French left is united around a common agenda: a clear and specific

ideological alternative is proposed to the electorate, which act as a cognitive shortcut enhancing voters to fulfil their civic duty. Unsurprisingly, the abstention rate recorded at parliamentary elections in 1975 was among the lowest at roughly 18 per cent (Figure 1). Opting for a change in power clearly showed, then, that voters trusted alternate political programs in their ability to solve the problem of unemployment which had become their priority since 1979 (Dupoirier, 1989). Conversely, the 1993 and 2008 economic crisis did not occur in the same context. They emerged in a context of the political crisis of the years between 1983-1985 which signalled the point where voters experienced difficulties in differentiating between the left and the right. Since early eighties, the ideological divide as a way to understand politics became progressively out of date by a majority of voters (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
Lack of Differentiation Between the Left and the Right (1981-2011)

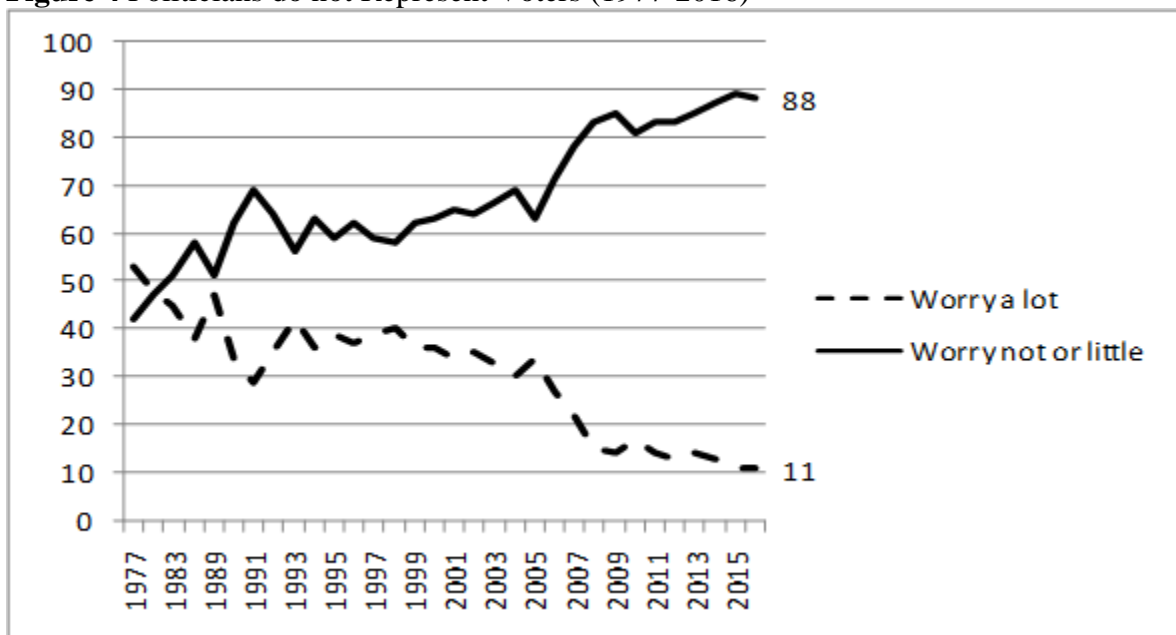


Sources : Le Gall Gérard (2003, Graphique p.53). Pourquoi le 21 avril, in l'état de l'opinion 2003, TNS SOFRES, Seuil, Paris. Actualisation Fondation Jean Jaures, [www.jean.jaures.org](http://www.jean.jaures.org).

This political crisis has its roots in the failure of the joint program of the left as well as the choice of a restrictive budgetary policy and a monetary policy aiming at strengthening the franc in 1984. In 1981, the left had not ruled for 25 years and voters could clearly distinguish between the right and the left. Since then however, this distinction became less evident and, in addition to that, successive left-wing and right-wing governments

were unable to tackle the unemployment problem. As a result, part of the electorate no longer understood political debates and did not believe anymore that electoral participation could be effective in improving the social and economic situation. The lack of ideological differentiation of political parties has fuelled a crisis of confidence and political representation. Indeed, opinion polls converge towards the same outcome. In 1997, 84 per cent of the French observed this political crisis compared to 79 per cent in 1989 (Duhamel and Mechet, 1999).<sup>xiii</sup> In addition, this political crisis was confirmed by the responses given by the respondents to two types of questions asked by the TNS SOFRES polls over the past years. To the question "When you think about politics, can you tell what you are experiencing?" in 1999, 57 per cent of respondents expressed mistrust, 27 per cent expressed boredom, 26 per cent expressed hope and 20 per cent expressed disgust. In 2003, 60 per cent of respondents associated politics with distrust.<sup>xiv</sup> Then, to the question "Do you trust politicians?" 53 per cent answered yes in 1961, 43 per cent in 1978, 33 per cent in 2003 and 25 per cent in 2010.<sup>xv</sup> Finally, there was an increasing number of French who believed that politicians did not care about what their constituents thought (Figure 4). They were 85 per cent in 2012 to support that statement compared to 42 per cent in 1977.

**Figure 4** Politicians do not Represent Voters (1977-2016)



Sources: Brice Teinturier 2004. Les Français et la politique : entre désenchantement et colère, in Duhamel O. et Teinturier, B., l'état de l'opinion 2004, TNS SOFRES, Seuil, Paris, année 2006, 27/06/2006 TNS

SOFRES, année 2008 Survey for « Lire la Politique » TNS SOFRES, année 2009 Baromètre de la confiance politique, Première Vague Janvier 2010, TNS SOFRES, année 2012 Baromètre de la confiance politique 4<sup>o</sup> Vague, TNS SOFRES, Vague 7 janvier 2016.

Therefore, the crisis of representativeness that France had experienced since early eighties was a direct consequence of a weakening of the ideological divide among incumbent parties. In such cognitive context where mechanism that help acquire political information vanish, electoral abstention occurs and it becomes a rational act in a cognitive sense.<sup>xvi</sup> According to Boudon (2010), “it is cognitively rational to endorse a given explanation of a phenomenon, if the explanation is made of acceptable and mutually compatible statements and if the competing available theories are weaker in one way or another”.<sup>xvii</sup> In other words, the French have rationally endorsed the belief that their representatives were, first, responsible for the social and economic troubles, and second, incompetent to improve their daily life and meet their aspirations in general. Holding such a belief is even more rational because no other political force rather than the traditional left/right parties have been in power under the fifth republic. As shown in figure 1, the high level of abstention recorded at parliamentary elections during the 1993 and 2008 economic crisis, at approximately 31 and 40 per cent respectively, has occurred within this specific context of persisting political crisis. Hence, the complex relation between economic crisis and electoral abstention is conditioned by the voters’ cognitive context. As such, our argument provides rationales to the support of a non-linear empirical relationship as evidenced by Martins and Veiga (2013).

### **3.2 Stigmatization mechanism and urbanization**

In order to explain comprehensively the increasing level of electoral abstention in France, one needs to take into account another complement phenomenon, namely, the fall in stigmatization costs associated with abstention. According to Table 2, 95 per cent of French voters believe that voting is a duty. Thus, the French cultural context encourages

electoral participation. Abstaining from voting is perceived as a lack of civic-mindedness in the general interest.

**Table 2** Attitude Towards Electoral Participation (in percentage).

Question: Concerning electoral participation, which of these statements do you relate to the closest?

	Set of French French Without age distinction 24	Set of French from 18 to 24
- Voting is not a duty, one votes if one wishes to	7	5
- Voting is a duty that must be fulfilled because it is important	92	95
- No opinion	1	0

Sources : Baromètre de la citoyenneté 2006, TNS SOFRES. <http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes-et-points-de-vue/barometre-de-la-citoyennete-mars-2006>

However, we make the argument that the duty to vote is no longer based on a support of a cultural norm such as *voting in order to protect the democracy* (Downs, 1957), but only on the fear of stigmatisation as an electoral abstainer. Indeed, staying away from polls exposes voters to a costly stigmatisation process (Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2009). Voters may have no idea of how they should vote or be persuaded that their political class is corrupt, inefficient and selfish, and yet vote simply to avoid social pressure from their peers who might accuse them of not participating in collective life, and thus endangering democracy. Part of the electorate, then, may no longer have a good reason to vote but still go to the poll to avoid stigma. Therefore, despite the ideological similarities between political parties and the crisis of political representation voters may still have incentives to vote. In doing so, the act of voting does not reveal their true beliefs over the virtues of democracy. This is exactly the situation described by Kuran (1990): voters falsify their preferences, and voting no longer allows for a way to reveal their confidence in democracy and the political class. In other words, the level of electoral abstention tends to rise if the costs associated with being stigmatised fall. Note, however, that social sanctions associated with abstention differ from one voter to another, depending on the



environment in which he or she evolves. Within small groups, such as family for example, a husband may stigmatise his wife if she does not vote.<sup>xviii</sup> A woman would thus abstain from voting if her husband himself abstains. Similarly, in rural areas, the costs of identifying electoral abstainers are much lower because voters are less numerous and it is easy to check whether he/she has voted or not. Therefore, the growth of cities is favourable to electoral abstention (Dormagen 2007).<sup>xix</sup> Conversely, the smaller the size of cities, the greater it is for voters to hide their intention to disregard the duty to vote.<sup>xx</sup>

#### **4. Conclusions**

The focus of this paper has been to explain the growing trend of French electoral abstention. Like many other social phenomena, the latter could be explained by a plurality of factors as discussed in section 2. Our contribution lies with integrating the voters' cognitive context and their perception of the efficiency of democracy into the analysis. In doing so, we provide a better understanding of the relationship between political crisis and electoral abstention. On the basis of surveys conducted on the French electorate, we show that the rise of abstention in France had developed itself in a specific political context: an ideological crisis where a majority of voters were unable to perceive any meaningful ideological differences between left-wing and right-wing parties, and as a result a crisis of representativeness. The common roots of these trends are voters' perception of democracy; what it is, and what one can expect from it. On the one hand, the lack of differentiation between political parties crowds out the less informed voters of the electorate. Those voters abstain from voting because they do not perceive anymore clear distinctions between the main policy alternatives available in the political arena and therefore, loose interest in politics. On the other hand, better informed voters stay away from polls because they have lost confidence in their leaders and in the political class as a whole. Nonetheless, these two groups will be even more incentivized to abstain from voting in a context of urbanization, the growth of single-parent families, and a fall of stigmatization costs associated with electoral abstention. In addressing the impact of voters' cognitive context, we have shown that the nature of the relation between

economic crisis and electoral abstention is far from being linear. Rather, our analysis has highlighted that economic crisis lead to electoral abstention if it coexist within a prior context of a crisis of political representation. In that respect, we provide theoretical foundations that lend support to a non-linear empirical relationship as evidenced by Martins and Veiga (2013). Further econometric analysis that specifically integrate voters' cognitive environment variables would bring interesting insights to the understanding of electoral abstention.

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<sup>1</sup> In France, the electoral abstention rate is computed by creating the ratio between the number of citizens who abstain from voting at an election and the number of citizens who are registered on the electoral lists at the day of the election. Therefore, citizens who are not registered on electoral lists are not included into the

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abstention pool. This method of computing the abstention rate underestimates the true abstention rate. Indeed, the true abstention rate should be computed as the ratio between the number of voters casting their vote and the number of citizens that belong to the electoral body. In France, according to the French Institute for Statistics (INSEE), citizens that are not registered are young, unemployed and live in cities ((Morin, 1983, 1984, 1988; Mayer and Percheron, 1990). Their profile is similar to those who abstain from voting. Since 1997, the French law allows citizens to be automatically registered on the electoral list of their home residence as long as they fulfil the age requirements. This would mechanically increase the number of registered citizens, and thus enhance electoral abstention. According to the current definition of the abstention rate, a citizen who abstains from voting is legally registered, but does not vote. In addition, the number of registered citizens is influenced by electoral rules. For instance, from 1848 to 1944, France had male universal suffrage. Only male citizens above 21 could cast their vote. In 1944, the right to vote had been granted to female citizens above 21. In 1974, the right to vote had been granted to citizens above 18. In addition, it was given to all professional military persons in 1945 and to all military persons, including the military reserve, in 1972, including the military reserve. This evolution of electoral rules inevitably affects the number of citizens that are engaged in the democratic process and willing to take part in it.

<sup>ii</sup> Morazé contends that “the high turnout at parliamentary elections shows that France during the 1920s is still the old France of liberalism; the one showing the success of railway companies before the revolution of 1848. Paris area and its extensions to the North on the one hand, and Lyon and the Rhône on the other hand, are regions supporting parliamentarianism” (Morazé, 1956, pp. 124-125).

<sup>iii</sup> Sources: For municipal elections, see Lancelot (1968, p.133) and <http://www.politiquemania.com/graphiques-abstention-municipales.html>, for cantonnal elections, see Lancelot (1968) and <http://www.france-politique.fr>, for presidential, european and regional elections, see <http://www.france-politique.fr>.

<sup>iv</sup> Sources: See footnote 3.

<sup>v</sup> See Blais (2006) and Stockemer (2015) for encompassing surveys.

<sup>vi</sup> In France for instance, electoral abstainers, on average, are elderly or young, have little education, are not homeowners, generally do not belong to the civil service or to the agricultural sector, and usually live in their place of residence for long time (Abrial et al. 2003; Muxel, 2007).

<sup>vii</sup> Postal voting was temporarily admitted in 1919 for refugees of the regions invaded not returned to their communes, and in 1924 for the civilian service in Germany. It was generalized in 1946. Voters who did not have the possibility to go to the polling station on polling day, could send their ballot by mail in advance. Due to abuse and fraud, this kind of voting was abolished by the law of 31/12/1975 and replaced by proxy voting (Law No. 75-1329 of 31 December 1975. Voting by proxy is a document that allows a citizen to

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delegate his right to vote to another voter, under certain conditions. The citizen participates in elections through a person mandated for this purpose (art. L71 to L77, R72 R80 of the electoral code, order from 8-12-2003, Decree 2004-2-12).

<sup>viii</sup> Contributions have also studied the influence of political campaign spending as well as the number of candidates (Fauvelle-Aymar and François, 2005), or the effect of holidays on electoral turnout (Dubois and Ben Lakhdar, 2007). Studying the 1997 French legislative elections Fauvelle-Aymar and François (2005) show that campaign spending have a clear positive effect on electoral participation as they provide political knowledge about the candidates and their program. The more voters possess information on the candidates, the more they are able to differentiate them. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that two sorts of abstention can be distinguished. On the one hand, there is abstention by alienation that corresponds to a situation where the voters abstain from electoral participation because of a distance between their preferences and the positions adopted by the different candidates that is too large. On the other hand, there is abstention by indifference, which is a situation where voters do not discern any meaningful differences between the positions of the candidates that would otherwise boost electoral participation (Anderson and Glomm, 1992). The differentiation of the candidates due to political campaigns leads to a reduction of abstention due to indifference. Also, analyzing the link between holidays and turnout for the 1995, 2002 and 2007 presidential elections, Dubois and Ben Lakhdar (2007) show a strong negative effect of holidays on turnout.

<sup>ix</sup> This result is in accordance with Blais (2000)'s finding who shows that voter turnout in the U.S. is paradoxically larger in national elections.

<sup>x</sup> In 2012 77% of French judged their political class corrupted. The % was of 58% in 1995. Sources: For data on how French voters perceive their political class, we used survey data. In 2013, Opinion-Way-Le Figaro gave a latest poll where 77 percent of the French viewed the political class as being corrupted (as a result of the "Cahuzac scandal" (07-04-2013). This survey offers a retrospective view on the period for the years 1995, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012. The question that has been asked is the following: Would you say that, as a general rule, French political leaders are rather honest or rather corrupt?

<sup>xi</sup> See Dougan and Munger (1989) who show that the ideology of an elected official can be used both to restrict voters' information costs, and to force him to serve the interests of the electoral body.

<sup>xii</sup> Aidt (2000) has also demonstrated that due to high cost of searching information, voters tend to be, on average, ignorant about the economy.

<sup>xiii</sup> Duhamel, Olivier and Philippe Méchet (1999). *L'état de l'opinion 1999*, TNS SOFRES, Seuil, Paris, p269.

<sup>xiv</sup> Source : Teinturier, B. (2004). *Les Français et la politique : entre désenchantement et colère*, in Duhamel O. and Teinturier, B., (2004) *l'état de l'opinion*, TNS SOFRES, Seuil, Paris.

<sup>xv</sup> CSA survey for BFMTV channel for the year 2010.



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<sup>xvi</sup> The rational choice literature is extensive (see Mueller (2003) and Aldrich (1993) for excellent surveys), and it is not the aim of the paper to discuss it. However, by referring to the notion of cognitive rationality, our paper feeds the debate on alternative type of rationality to solve the so called paradox of voting and “non-voting”. See Fauvelle-Aymar et al. (2000) for a discussion of these debates.

<sup>xvii</sup> Boudon (2010), chapter 2, pp18.

<sup>xviii</sup> This could also lead to the argument that the rise of single parent families in developed countries may explain abstention, because reputation costs in major cities are close to zero.

<sup>xix</sup> Dormagen (2007) had already proposed this type of explanation, but he had not linked this phenomenon to the existence of reputation costs.

<sup>xx</sup> Boy and Mayer (1997) have shown that electoral participation is positively correlated to the size of the urban area of residence. It is stronger in rural areas and in small towns where interpersonal links and social control are stronger.