

**THE CANDIDATES**  
Amateurs and Professionals in Politics

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# INTRODUCTION

It was a little after 1pm on June 20, 2017, in the Palais Bourbon, the seat of the French National Assembly. A new legislative session was about to begin, and the new MPs, elected only days earlier, had arrived on the premises. On this first day, they could look forward to going through a long list of administrative formalities. They could be seen moving from one office to another, filling out forms, getting the key to their office, or retrieving their badge. They also collected their parliamentary insignia: the tricolour sash, an emblem that would adorn their vehicle for the next five years, as well as the “*baromètre*,” an elegant but discrete brooch that signals their status as a lawmaker. Despite the blistering heat outside, all were in formal attire, no doubt having been told in advance they would sit for official photos in the *hémicycle*, the iconic semi-circular chamber of the National Assembly, with its 577 dark red velvet seats.

Along the way, they filed past the crowd of journalists present for the occasion. These included the regulars, of course, a dozen of full-time correspondents who spend their weeks roaming around this former palace, together with those who cover question time, and who generally attend only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. But today was different, and the usual spectators were clearly outnumbered. Dozens of news reporters were on site, probably more than a hundred. The ambiance, too, was different, not the least in the *Salle des Quatre-Colonnes*, the organized official interface where journalists and politicians can meet. The whole place was abuzz with activity and bustling with people, some clearly not familiar with the locale. At one point, I even spotted entertainment reporters among those thronging in the vestibule; they gave the impression of being lost, as if they did not quite know where to look, or what to look at.

Arguably, this legislature was special. In the wake of Emmanuel Macron’s triumph in the presidential election just a month before, a very unusual parliamentary cohort had been ushered in. Of these new MPs, 72% had never been elected to parliament before, where this figure is rarely over 40% in normal years. The landslide victory of Emmanuel Macron’s party, *En Marche!* (EM)<sup>1</sup> also saw a record number of incumbents eliminated, some of them fixtures on the French political scene, while a number of news faces sparked surprise. But this renewal was not in itself enough to explain the flock of journalists or the unusual atmosphere. More than a simple alternation of political power, more than a massive changeover of personnel, the 15<sup>th</sup> legislature of the French lower house was marked by a record number of political novices, people with little to no experience

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<sup>1</sup> The party was renamed *La République en Marche* [*The Republic on the Move*] right after the elections. In the following manuscript, *En marche!* thus refers to the party before June 2017, and uses *La République en Marche* (LREM) after.

in politics. And it was these individuals, who had become quite rare on the national political stage in recent decades, who occupied centre stage.

For an observer in the halls of the Palais Bourbon, the new arrivals were easy to spot. Some appeared amused, others bewildered. They were often awestruck as they moved from one room to another. They spent time taking photos, alone or in small groups. They sometimes looked a bit awkward, too. As I waited in the *hémicycle*, the room where the plenary sessions are held, while MPs queued to have their official portrait taken, a few asked, tourist-style, if I could “take a picture” of them, which was immediately sent to family and friends. And while lingering in the *Salle des Quatre-Colonnes*, I found myself called on to act as an impromptu guide. One MP asked me the way to the men’s room, another asked directions to his own office. Yet another first-time MP turned to me to ask if she was allowed to answer questions from a journalist. The overall ambiance was more that of a school excursion than a return from parliamentary recess.

The contrast with the previous legislature, which I had also studied, was striking. It was the consequence of a rather atypical election, especially by the standards of French politics. Nothing had gone according to plan during the two campaigns that had culminated that spring; the presidential election in May immediately followed (as has been the case since 2002) by legislative elections the following month. The incumbent socialist president, François Hollande, hampered by the internal dissidence in his party that had marred the end of his mandate, by opposition to his policies, and by his own massive unpopularity, had announced late in the day that he would not seek a second term. But more surprises were still to come. Imported from the U.S. during the 2000s as a badge of “modernity,” the use of party primaries to select candidates for the major parties produced unexpected results. On both the right and the left, the process led to the nomination of the contenders with the most radical programmes, in the form of Benoît Hamon – from the left wing of the *Socialist Party* (PS) – and François Fillon, on the hard right of *Les Républicains* (LR)

Another surprise was the emergence of Hollande’s former minister of Economics, Emmanuel Macron, as an official candidate in the race, after months of discrete campaigning. Barely 39 years old, Macron had begun his career in politics only a few years earlier, after working as an investment banker. Unlike all of his predecessors, he had never held elected office at any level. His campaign launch in November 2016 thus elicited real interest, thanks in part to its novelty, together with a great deal of scepticism concerning his prospects. So much so that when Macron won the presidency in May, and a sizable parliamentary majority in June, commentators and political scientists alike were left to marvel at how the stars had aligned so perfectly in his favour.

The greatest surprise of the campaign, however, came from elsewhere. Macron’s platform, reiterated week after week by his team, was truly unusual. Typically, candidates run on subjects

outside the political field itself, such as taxes, immigration, health, or the environment. This was not the case for the leader of *En Marche!*, who for months insisted on one theme: the need for new blood to revive French politics. He claimed the political sphere was obstructed by the presence of too many career politicians, accused of putting their own strategies and chances for re-election over the wellbeing of the country.

During one of his first public meetings, even before he formally announced his candidacy, Macron made democratic renewal his central message. In an appearance in Strasbourg on October 4, 2016, the former cabinet member – he had resigned from Hollande’s government a few weeks earlier – laid out his vision of the state of French politics. It was bleak. Democracy had been “confiscated” by special interests for too long. In his eyes, union and business representatives did not reflect society; the voting system worked to prevent the expression of certain ideas. Political parties no longer attracted “talent”. But Macron’s most serious accusation was directed at politicians. They were accused of making a mere “occupation” out of the noble calling of politics, of pursuing narrow “self-interest” over the common good. For Macron, the political class with its antiquated habits was the main culprit for the crisis of confidence that had beset the country.

Democratic inertia was not a new theme for Macron at this point. Back in May 2016, when his nascent movement had barely started fundraising, an email (later revealed by the press) spelled out this same charge in no uncertain terms. Sent to several dozen potential donors while Macron was still a cabinet member, its message was clear; resources had to be found to support a future candidate who would “crack open a system in which politics has become a matter of seasoned professionals,” to breath fresh air in a “nauseating milieu.”<sup>2</sup> For Macron and his supporters, politics had become “professionalised”, an occupation in its own right. It was the exclusive domain of a handful of politicians, a “cast” that had to be removed from power.

This line of argument would be hammered home repeatedly over the year that led the young candidate to victory and the Élysée Palace, the residence of the French President. In many ways it was remarkable that it should be an up-and-coming technocrat and ex-minister who took up this fight. Hitherto, this charge against professional politicians had chiefly been mobilised by marginal parties and figures, both in France and other countries. All over Europe, this theme had bought resounding success to the parties that used it, from Italy’s *Movimento 5 Stelle* [Five Stars Movement], created by the actor Beppe Grillo in 2013, to Spain’s *Podemos* [We Can], a party created in 2014 on a platform of political renewal. Even Donald Trump’s vow to “drain the swamp” in Washington was part of the same repertoire. Also a political outsider, the multi-millionaire businessman focused his campaign on railing against current office-holders. His electoral platform, baptized the “Contract with the American Voter,” began with a demand for term limits for all

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2 Email sent to potential donors, quoted by *Le Point*, May 12, 2016.

members of Congress.<sup>3</sup> Although unconstitutional, the measure was often presented as an expression of his desire to shake up the political ecosystem by bringing in not only “new people,” but also “a different type of people.”

The resonance of Macron’s repeated call to usher in new faces must be understood in this light. For at least two decades, criticism of the monopoly over political power exercised by a small number of elected representatives has grown louder and louder. In France as elsewhere, the figure of the political “professional” – a polysemic term that suggests long experience of operating inside the political field – served as a convenient, if not indispensable, trope. Never the most popular figure, the “career politician” became a kind of bogeyman that had to be dispensed with, while its antithesis, the political novice, emerged as a perfect alternative, a solution to most of our ills.

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3 In so doing he reactivated a classic though cyclical trope in U.S. politics (and beyond) against career politicians. In his landmark 1990 essay on amateurs in Congress, D. Canon wrote that: “The suspicions held by many Americans of career politicians and the long-standing tradition of ‘running against Washington’ can be exploited by amateurs who can credibly claim that they are not ‘one of them.’” (Canon, 1990, p. 3).

How did this abrupt reversal happen? Looking at the French case in-depth, while drawing on other polities for comparative purposes, this book investigates the intensity of these calls for political renewal. Vituperations against politicians aside, other signs have likewise indicated a desire for a more inclusive democracy. The increasing appeal of direct democracy (promoting referendums, popular initiatives), the proliferation of “citizen” ballots in various elections, or the return of techniques long considered unrealistic, such as sortition (random selection) of representatives, were all signs of an interest in involving laypeople in public life. As we shall see, it was not only the appetite for political change that conferred on the 2010s its markedly “anti-professional” hue. This period also saw the culmination of a shift in political careers that stretches back nearly half a century, in France and in Europe more widely.

At the same time, this book raises another, more complex question, with implications that extend well beyond the French and European context. It investigates whether and to what degree the past trajectory of political leaders has an impact on their practice of politics, and on the functioning of democracy overall. The answer has important implications for the claim that a renewal of the political personnel can have the transformative effect implicitly assumed by those who clamour for renewal, that a change in casting might transform the entire show. Demands to replace “career politicians” with representatives from more varied career backgrounds are premised on the belief that the arrival of novices will change politics, for the better. The replacement of long-time representatives by laypeople is assumed to introduce new ways of thinking and acting to a hermetic, self-involved sphere. But is there any evidence of this assumption? This ramifications clearly go beyond the case of *En Marche!*, or indeed France. Ultimately, it comes down to questioning what the “professionalisation” of politics does to politics in practice, or even more broadly: what does political experience do to the practice of politics?

## **Militant certainties... and scientific questions**

The question of what determines how elective representatives behave has been analysed since the origin of parliamentary systems. This is partly because it reflects the foundation of representative democracy. Indeed, if belonging to a social group or having had a particular political trajectory influences political practice and behaviour, if what (and who) representatives are or what they have been determines the way they represent citizens, then the whole mechanism of delegation is thrown into question.



Back before the French Revolution, the American founding fathers questioned the ability of those who were elected to provide “substantive” representation regardless of their backgrounds. Even among federalists the question was thorny; James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers* (n° 52) that it was preferable that those in government had “an intimate sympathy” with those they represented, where Hamilton considered this a risk and was less opposed to the British hereditary system.

Since then, the question has been the subject of hundreds of scientific studies, perhaps even thousands. This body of research seeks to understand the impact of a particular social quality or situation (gender, social backgrounds, regional or ethnic origin, or disability, for example) on the way politics is conducted. Even before the introduction of the distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation by Pitkin (1967), there were regular debates on the idea that the presence in politics of people belonging to a particular group could influence the way in which the interests of that group were represented.<sup>4</sup> And as both parliaments and governments almost never represent the wider society (Best and Cotta, 2000; Evans and Tilley, 2018) this question remains relevant today. In fact, it is all the more salient because the schism between voters and their political elites – which can be clearly seen in the mistrust towards politicians visible in many societies – only makes this issue more pressing.

Surprisingly, the role of political experience on political practice has been less studied. Assertions by militants that professionalised representatives are less invested in the general interest, or are only motivated by their own re-election, or even that they conduct politics differently, by no means meet with scientific consensus.

Of course, nothing would be more misguided than to assert that the topic was never an object of study. Back in the early 1960s, political scientist Donald Matthews differentiated between American senators based on their parliamentary behaviour (1960). After he examined their path to the Senate, Matthews saw a strong connection between political practice, institutional structure and past trajectory. But he also considered this research exploratory. However stimulating, his argument hinged only on a handful of typical cases that were not systematically analysed. A decade later, his colleague H. Douglas Price also took up this question, this time focusing on the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Congress. In this context, where representatives all had another primary profession, politics was practiced quite differently. Resignations were frequent which led to high turnover rates, and coalitions were therefore also more shifting (Price, 1975). The results were telling, but the book fell short of studying the effect of experience on individuals. In addition to being dated, these results

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance (Mansbridge, 1999), (Phillips, 1995), (Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski, 2010), or (Carnes, 2012).

were aggregated, making it difficult to identify a causality between the individual careers and the political practice. Any individual effect could, at best, only be deduced from collective variations.

This is also the question posed in David Canon's book on amateurs in the US Congress (1990), where the author tests the link between candidates' political background and their behaviour in Congress. The book is rich: it builds on a few classics (Wilson, 1969) and it summarizes a vast amount of existing literature on adjacent topics. It also leverages empirical materials, both on careers and on practice, that were at the disposal of the author at that time. His response is a prudent yes, given that the data is hard to collect, and according to him not always conclusive, at least at the individual level. Since then, few studies have successfully identified a professionalisation effect on practices. This might come as a surprise given the extent of criticism levelled against professional politicians, but one would be hard-pressed to find definitive evidence, one way or the other. In what is probably the most solid recent work on this question, political scientist Peter Allen extensively reviewed the literature on the topic (2014), and he came to the same conclusion. To him, large aspects of this topic were still waiting for a definitive answer.

When it comes to knowing whether a parliament of novices would do politics differently, the scientific evidence tends to respond with a tentative, nuanced yes that requires further research. But ironically enough, when it comes to knowing if novices would change politics for the best, as Mr. Macron kept promising during the 2017 campaign, the existing scientific evidence tends to point the other way. In the 1990s, the introduction of a maximum number of mandates in state-level local legislatures made room for less experienced representatives to move into politics. This provided US political scientists with an interesting field experiment to analyse the potential ability of political novices to return power to laypeople. The results were mixed at best. Various studies conducted using this change in legislature converged to attest to a loss of influence for legislative bodies. The arrival of representatives who were unfamiliar with the political game shifted the balance of power, sometime drastically, toward the executive and the administration (Kousser, 2005). Other scientific studies, like those initiated after a gender parity reform forced political parties to select more women as their candidates for different elected position, confirm these results. Novice women who were thrown into this unfamiliar milieu and had trouble finding their place among their more established peers and were consequently relegated to second order tasks (Achin, 2016).

Arguably, despite the fact that they are both relevant, these types of studies are not looking at the same object. While the latter type often focuses on particular individuals (or just a few) in order to make sense of their complete experience, the former looks mostly at the aggregate level, comparing legislatures. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn for all individuals at a given moment, which points to a larger problem, one that explains why definitive results on the role of experience are hard to reach. All investigation into this area is plagued by two measurement difficulties. Firstly, characterizing a politician's background is harder than one might think. Beyond the data issues which I will soon return to, the question of what a career politician (and by opposition, a novice) actually is, raises many questions. Is a person a "professional politician" if they have spent decades in politics? If they have spent only a few years, but all of their adult life, in the political sphere? Or should we stick with the oft-evoked Weberian definition of the professional as the one who lives "off" politics at a given moment? But in this latter case, all politicians are professionals as soon as they get elected, and that is probably something few would disagree with, otherwise politics would be reserved for plutocrats.

Clearly, terms such as "career politician", "professional politicians", and a few others that are often treated as synonymous, conceal a variety of trajectories behind one signifier. The growing criticism against "political professionalisation" in Europe and the emergence of the term in the public sphere certainly has not helped, as it has gone hand-in-hand with an even wider diversification of its meanings. This observation was recently made by researchers in an overview of the literature on the British case. They noted that in the wake of increased academic attention, the concept has been "stretched to cover an ever-wider variety of cases, while the spotlight has shifted from one definitional dimension to another" (Allen, Magni, Searing, Warncke 2020, p. 210).

The second reason why the role of the practical experience of politics has not received the scientific attention it deserves is that this would require connecting two types of research that each tend to stop on either side of the doors to parliament. As Peter Allen has correctly noted (2014), most analyses focus on pre-parliamentary careers, as they try to account for what make some people more likely to be elected. Using different methods, they document what it takes to stand and later to win an election, describing the typical pathways to power.<sup>5</sup> The other group of analysis focuses on practices, on what MPs end up doing once they are in parliament.<sup>6</sup> Of course, many studies in one area evoke the other aspect, but few do it in a symmetrical way, dedicating as much energy to one aspect as to the other. There are sound empirical reasons for this. Both types of analysis require a heavy investment. Pre-parliamentary careers can be traced, but at the cost of painstaking – some would even say punishing – data work. Parliamentary practice can also be analysed, but even with the new abundance of digital data, the question of what MPs spend their time doing remains hard to answer decisively. Not all the available information is relevant, and all relevant variables are not readily available; moreover, even if one was to access all the information required, there is no obvious statistical technique that can treat such multidimensional data. That is why most quantitative studies focus on only one parliamentary practice (votes, legislative work, media participation, etc.)

Finding ways to measure these two aspects, and consequently analysing what political experience does to the practice of politics, is precisely what I set out to do in this book. Looking in detail at the careers of French MPs before they entered parliament, but also investigating the practice of every one of them on a wide variety of activities after their election, I was hopeful that I could provide fresh answers to this nagging question. The election of a brand-new legislature in 2017, with hundreds of newcomers and dozens of complete political novices working alongside seasoned politicians who had been saved from the political tsunami initiated by Macron provided me with this unique opportunity.

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5 In this rich literature, see for instance (Best and Cotta, 2000); (Matthews, 1984), (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) and more recently (Ohmura, Bailer, Meißner and Selb, 2018) for a rich approach.

6 The list is long here too. An important literature looks at roll calls (Rice 1927; Hix and Noury, 2007), others at surgery and constituency work (Fenno, 2003; Costa and Poyet, 2016), others again at the “roles” MPs define for themselves (Searing, 1994).

## A Sociologist in the House

As Emma Crewe wrote in her study on Westminster, parliaments have everything an anthropologist desires: “Conflict sits with co-operation. Friends and foes argue, soothe and perform curious rituals, and hierarchies shift around” (2015, p. 1). So there is nothing surprising about the fact that several social sciences studies have been done on these spaces known for their order and rituals. Some twenty years ago, Marc Abélès demonstrated the benefit of this kind of monographic approach in the case of the French Parliament (Abelès, 2000), and many of his observations remain relevant today. The same holds true for social scientists more generally. Because most of the action happens in a confined space, parliaments are a fantastic theatre for politics, a stage where an observer can capture and analyse the fabric of everyday politics probably better than anywhere else.

So I did not hesitate for long when I was offered the opportunity to study this institution, back in 2015. I had heard from a colleague that a senior official was looking to invite social scientists to conduct research on the parliament. Naturally, we both had conditions; I wanted to be given a reasonably free access to most spaces, the right to interview MPs, but also officials, staffers, and lower-ranking employees. She wanted me to be discreet, and not disturb the orderly organization of the space. My presence, she worried, could raise some eyebrows. Although over 2,000 people work in this building every day, and although many groups come for tours, she was anxious that having a sociologist freely wandering the corridors of the Palais Bourbon might appear a bit eccentric. But she was also curious enough, and we came to an agreement. I would have the same access rights as a parliamentary journalist, but I could also access data and archives, and she would help organize for me to observe in different departments, at my request. In the end, she provided valuable help in navigating the intricacies of this old palace where tradition still holds an important place. These rights evolved over the course of the study, sometimes more generous, sometimes less, but I never felt I was constrained in my study.

But the main reason for my decision to study the French National Assembly has to do with the role that the lower house plays in political life in France. Although its role has been somewhat reduced in the semi-presidential system of the Fifth Republic, it remains a key stage in political careers. Unlike in parliamentary regimes, it is not necessary to be an MP to be a cabinet member. Macron himself went directly up the political ladder – he was for a time the Economy and Finance Minister – without having ever been elected. This is, however, not the standard pathway, as nearly two thirds of future government ministers are first recruited to the lower house (Behr and Michon, 2015). The remaining third, who are appointed from civil society, often turn to the National Assembly for a position once their time in government is over. A quasi-obligatory stage along the path to accessing roles of greater responsibility, the lower house is also, in France, the first echelon

in national politics. It is the one place where older, experienced representatives who have been involved in politics for decades rub shoulders with ambitious young delegates, for whom this is an initial foothold. This was especially true in 2017, with the arrival *en masse* of hundreds of new MPs whose time and past positions in politics ranged from the highly experienced, with over 40 years in national politics, to complete novices who had had no prior political engagement whatsoever. From the point of view of the study I wished to conduct, the National Assembly was nothing short of what the North-American sociologist Robert Merton called “a strategic research site”, a prime location through which to access a larger reality – the political field.

To take this further, I wanted to supplement this ethnographic approach with statistics. My intuition was that the questions raised above, which were also voiced in the public sphere, about the role of experience in politics, could finally be answered if I were to find new, fine-grained individual data on how MPs carry out their work. This relied on the promise of the booming field of computational social sciences. This multi-disciplinary endeavour rests on two pillars; one is to make the most of the abundant data to ask old or new but always scientifically relevant questions; and the second is to leverage the power of computers to provide better responses to classic investigations. In my case, I resorted to machine learning algorithms to investigate parliamentary activity in a more refined way. And in this endeavour, ethnography would help locate and interpret the relevant data, while the algorithms would help me cast a new light on it.

This was the plan, and it seemed to work at the beginning. From 2015 to 2017, I often returned to the Parliament. Most of the time I was alone, but sometimes students I was supervising tagged along. Over these two years, I was able to conduct dozens of interviews with MPs, staffers, journalists, and other people present on the premises. My students also conducted interviews, thus helping me multiply the points of view on this protean institution. Meanwhile, I began collecting biographical data. The idea was to gather original good-quality data to measure what had changed in the careers of these elected representatives. Along with two colleagues – Julien Boelaert and Sébastien Michon – I set out to entirely reconstruct the professional and political trajectories for all the MPs over five legislatures since the 1970s.

In my naivete, I thought this would be an easy task. Biographies are often available online, on Wikipedia, and even on the official website of the National Assembly. But I quickly realized that they are largely misleading. Upon arriving in the House, MPs are free to choose what they declare in their biographies, and they often “polish” them to suit the image of themselves they wish to promote. Unsurprisingly, very few MPs wrote “career politician”, “politician”, or “former parliamentary assistant” in the space reserved for their occupation. Whether real or perceived, the risk of being immediately disqualified for such a description is too great.

This problem was endemic, as I quickly found out. One socialist frontbencher mentioned on his biography that he was a “senior private sector manager” even though his last professional position outside of politics dated to a two-year temporary position back in the early 1990s. After the socialists’ massive defeat in the legislative elections in 1993, he had not managed to find a fall-back position due to a lack of openings, so he spent a few years working in the private sector. This professional experience was short-lived, as he was elected a few years later and then remained within politics. But thirty years later, it was this short stint that he put in the “occupation” section of his official profile. Other examples are just as emblematic. Former prime minister Manuel Valls listed his profession as “communication advisor,” a post he held ... after entering politics, when he was a young aide in the cabinet of Michel Rocard, another Prime Minister. As for François Fillon, the right-wing champion in the 2017 presidential election, on the Assembly page, he indicated that he had “no occupation”,<sup>7</sup> even though he had held one of the prime parliamentary assistant positions in the Assembly since 1978, before embarking on a long and very successful career as an elected official.

The truth, as I painfully discovered, is that MPs are very strategic about the identities they put forward in these biographies. As a result, I could not trust the online biographies and other open data repositories which have become more numerous in recent years. To get around these issues, I had to do it the old way, the hard way. Through a collective effort, the biographies of more than 2,400 MPs were therefore pieced together by hand from various sources. The information was retrieved from the archives of the National Assembly, from local media, obituaries, and from Wikipedia pages and LinkedIn profiles for the most recent candidates. We double checked them wherever possible and looked for inconsistencies. In practice, we collected all the available information on careers in and outside of politics for each MP and for each year of their adult life after age 20 (before that, data was patchy). Some points remained uncertain at the end, but for the most part they were resolved. This effort to create a consistent prosopography that reflects the careers of political actors on such a large scale is, to my knowledge, unprecedented. It provides us a

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<sup>7</sup> As the courts would decide later, it was his wife who had “no occupation”, although she had been paid to work as a staffer for over two decades, receiving nearly one million euros of taxpayers’ money for non-existent work.



detailed overview of national-level political careers over the course of the last half-century in France.

It was supplemented by individual level data on how MPs practice politics. One again, my approach was inductive. I first studied MPs in their milieu, tried to uncover the many ways one can invest oneself in parliamentary activity. Only then did I look for data that would help me operationalize these criteria. This method runs counter to a practice that has become standard in (bad) science, one that tends to look for a data set – possibly one that is available online – and then declares it fit to respond to the question. To study parliament, I could have resorted to one of these databases that are compiled by institution or civil society organization. They display a series of disconnected and not always relevant metrics, such as the number of times a given MP spoke in a committee, or the number of amendments she submitted. Against this quantophrenic approach, I spent days collecting data I deemed relevant for the problem at hand, searching beyond the information immediately available.

The research process took longer than I initially intended. My initial plan was to write an empirical opus on the rise of professionalism in French politics. I did so with two colleagues (Boelaert, Michon and Ollion, 2017), but shortly after it was released in April 2017, the book was out of date. The electoral season, with its share of surprises and the massive replacement it had produced, made some of my conclusions about the tendency towards political professionalisation defunct. In other words, the renewal ushered in by Macron abruptly turned my sociological opus into a history book. The arrival of nearly one hundred political novices at the Palais Bourbon completely changed the political landscape. The seemingly unstoppable rise of professionalism had come to a (temporary) end. But this new situation provided an unprecedented opportunity to test many of the hypotheses expressed in the various studies on professionalisation, including those explored at the end of the book I had just published. Even before the results of the second round were in, I negotiated my return to the halls of Parliament. This time, I was granted a generous security clearance that enabled me to observe the new legislature in operation over more than a year. So, I again took up my interviews, observation, and data collection. Around 30 interviews were conducted with MPs and various other figures who gravitate around the small world of the Palais Bourbon. An additional 50 interviews were conducted by my students as part of a research seminar I co-taught for four years. Countless more informal conversations also happened over the course of my fieldwork. These were not recorded, but were duly noted in my notebooks – and they often yielded more interesting results with respondents, who often confused me for a journalist.

This book thus presents the results of this extended investigation. In addition to the aforementioned quantitative data, it combines archival material, research notes from extensive observation sessions, and excerpts from countless interviews. It shows individuals who act, argue,

insult each other, or trade in low blows. It presents them through their lived experience of everyday politics, in an attempt to uncover who they are. It does not, however, provide any names or elements that would enable the identification of these representatives. Most of the participants have been anonymized and there are two main reasons for this. The first is essential to the research pact I established with them. I promised my interviewees anonymity and could not revoke that once the fieldwork was finished. It would be impossible to betray such trust. But there is a second reason, which is equally important in my eyes. Several of the figures in the book are well-known, at least to a French audience, and a handful would be familiar to an international audience. Others will become so in years to come. Quoting them by name would probably provide additional information to some readers, but it would also personalize the analysis, when I want to emphasise the fact that these are individuals acting within a broader structure which guides their action.

The argument is that the individuals in this book act under a host of constraints – their past careers as well as their current positions. Thus, in addition to adding a potential bias to the narrative, depending on the information and opinions of the reader, naming interviewees would run counter to my general argument about the role of experience in politics. Following the existing conventions in sociology, individuals are therefore referred to by pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity, and the information necessary to understand their situation (like their education or social background) is provided with this initial presentation. This choice is thus not just pragmatic and driven by the needs to conduct this study, it is also theoretical. It is based on my conviction, acquired as I was doing this research, that we should refuse to treat politicians any differently from other individuals that populate our research. On the contrary, elected representatives would benefit from being described as ordinary men and women who, for a time, have pursued a specific career path. To study today's *homo politicus*, we must explore these people's history, their interests and passions, their values and their hopes, their labour and their suffering, as we would with any other sociological subject.

## **The illusion of a renewal**

This research provides insights into the contemporary political world. The first result of this investigation is that the main promise made by the Macron campaign, namely that the massive influx of novice politicians would drastically modify the way politics is done, was not kept. For the most part, the 2017 novices did not successfully forge a place for themselves in the French political sphere. Despite their repeated efforts, only a handful of them managed to carry some weight during the legislature – a result that dovetails with the existing works on amateurs. The book also probes the reasons for that previous status quo. It expounds the causes that made these rookie MPs helpless, despite their undeniable will to make a difference and even sometimes the will of their

party. Not only did they lack practical skills and knowledge, but they also had to adapt to a world in which the rules were already laid down but were largely unfamiliar to them. They also lacked the connections and necessary social capital that make politicians efficient. All of this, in turn, contributed to a dearth of the kind of self-assurance their established colleagues had in spades, and thus reinforced their inability to make their presence felt.

Despite an unprecedented renewal, re-elected MPs, as well as some newcomers with more political experience, snapped up the main positions of power. In particular, former staffers and parliamentary assistants monopolized top jobs in parliaments, exactly as they used to do before. Worse still, for those who supported the renewal proclaimed by *En Marche!* during the campaign, the laymen who were elected following Emmanuel Macron's victory helped him shift the balance of power further away from the legislative branch and towards the executive. Encouraged to not challenge the party to which they owed everything, their presence meant that ministers, former cabinet members, and MPs well-versed in politics as it used to be, were free to operate in the most traditional way possible.

This conclusion should come as no surprise. There was a certain naivete in the belief that a simple change in casting could deeply alter the functioning of the political sphere. This is not limited to *En Marche!* alone, or even to the French case. It forces us to critically examine certain responses that have gained popularity in recent years due to the crisis of political trust. Every election in recent memory has seen the emergence of independent candidates running without party backing, who share the belief that politics needs "new leaders" who will be able to bring radical transformation. They claim political amateurs will make better public leaders, that they will represent wider society more appropriately, and that once in power, they will do politics differently. What the French experience shows is that this belief is, at least in part, misguided. The change they aspire to will not happen merely by bringing in a few dozen, or even hundreds of individuals from different backgrounds. It will take much more to achieve the profound transformation they call for – and that is deeply needed.

Let me be clear. My goal here is not to flatly reject all these initiatives, and still less to discredit their demands. It is plausible that changing political figures, or at least some of them, may be necessary to achieve the shift that is desired. These initiatives also raise the essential question of the identity of representatives, their past, and their ways of doing politics, an aspect that is all too often concealed, especially in a country like France with its deeply entrenched universalism. Instead, my goal is to move the conversation forward, by looking at what prevented these novices participating fully, despite quite favourable conditions given that they arrived *en masse*. Using the French case, this book sets out to identify the origins of political inertia and to understand the logics that led to it. Based on a full-scale evaluation of this quasi-natural experiment – rather than on an

abstract or extraordinary situation – it looks at why the introduction of novices into an existing institution will likely fail to produce the expected results.

This, in my view, should lead us to change the terms of the debate. Rather than asking ourselves whether a change in the political casting influences politics, we should explore under which conditions such a change could happen. The example of the French *status quo* can teach us much about the logics at work in this. Such inertia is largely the result of the fact that despite the massive turnover (for memory, there were 72% of newly elected MPs), the amateurs were encouraged to join a world in which the rules of the game had not changed, a world in which politicians with more experience knew the ropes and could impose their will. Responsibility for this, though, does not lie solely with more experienced MPs. The reason these new arrivals did not succeed is that they were not regarded as legitimate politicians by other actors – journalists, public officials, but also other citizens. Because they did not fit the commonly accepted idea of what a politician is, or does, novices were excluded from the political game, or they excluded themselves after having been publicly disqualified. To better understand the failure of this experiment, we need to get a better grasp of contemporary politics, to describe the milieu the novices were projected into. We need to follow them from their constituency to the parliament, from their house to their offices. Analysing the experience of these new parliamentarians leads us to explore, and better understand, this highly specific activity that is professional politics.

## **Waiting lines and the making of *homo politicus***

Besides these empirical results, the book makes a broader, more theoretical contribution. It contends that to understand who political leaders are and explain why these novices failed, we may need to change the way we see careers in politics. As mentioned above, the 2017 campaign was centred on the idea of an increasing “professionalisation of politics”. The term was widely used by Emmanuel Macron’s campaign team, but it had a broader appeal. Over recent decades, the term and its correlate noun (professional, or career politicians) had gained prominence in the public sphere. In fact, both terms were routinely used by journalists, candidates, and citizens. They also became an important subject in the social sciences, judging by the numerous books and articles published on the topic<sup>8</sup>.

This framing has its virtues. It was, for instance, instrumental in describing some fundamental changes that happened in the organization of politics in previous decades, as well as some that occurred more than a century ago. But analysing contemporary politics with terms such as “political

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<sup>8</sup> See (Allen, Magni, Searing, Warncke 2020) for a recent overview, (Michon and Ollion, 2018) for a detailed analysis on the French case.

professionals”, “career politicians” or “political professionalisation” increasingly runs the risk of obscuring the analysis. The main reason is that these terms lump together people with different, sometimes hardly comparable, trajectories and attitudes toward politics. It is possible to be a national political actor, like an MP, and still share very little in the way of experience with one’s colleagues. Local representatives who spent decades in power at the municipal or departmental level before they reached a national position late in their lives often have little in common with those who are parachuted into a constituency after a brief stint in a ministerial cabinet straight after graduating from Sciences Po – the school of the political elite in France. The dichotomy conceals highly divergent pathways into politics. Similarly, to describe the process that happened mainly in terms of “professionalisation” may not adequately describe what has been happening in recent decades. If professionalism simply refers to someone who lives off politics, according to Weber’s oft-evoked definition of professional politicians, then all French MPs have been professionals since 1852, when the parliamentary allowance was permanently reintroduced.

These difficulties are explored in the following chapters, along with other criticisms on the over-reliance on the “professionalisation” rhetoric to describe recent changes in political careers. For the moment, let us be content with saying that Max Weber’s canonical distinction between those who live “for” and those who live “off” politics, or the distinction between “career” and “novices,” does not do justice to the numerous questions raised by the recruitment of political representatives.

To analyse the transformations of the political field in recent decades, this book invites us to conceptualise political careers as a “waiting line”, an ordered succession of positions where politicians must bide their time before accessing important roles. In this line, politicians learn the tricks of the trade, they create contacts that will later be useful, and they learn to appreciate politics<sup>9</sup>. The queue prepares them for their arrival in a position of power, it helps them adjust to the milieu they aspire to be part of. What is more, far from being the democratic device it could be, where everyone waits equally for their turn, these queues are also rife with inequalities – some wait for a long time, while others take the fast track.

As we shall see, this change in perspective is insightful. It shows that the central tendency in the French political sphere in recent decades has not been “professionalisation”, an inexorable increase in the number of political professionals unexpectedly interrupted by the 2017 election, but rather the development of an orderly queue for access to national level elected positions. It explains the increased conformity of MPs, whether in terms of social background or of practices. It also

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9 Of course, not all politicians want to become MPs, and not all MPs want to become cabinet members. This is only a partial limitation to the waiting line metaphor, as the modal situation is in fact this desire to move up the ladder following this established path. As we shall see, because the waiting line socializes, it produces desires among those who are in it.

explains the outcry that happened in 2017 when, in the wake of Macron, dozens of neophytes successfully managed to access positions of power.

The numbers are telling. From the 1970s to the mid-2010s, politicians spent an increasing amount of time waiting for their turn to access national mandates. In 1978, a French MP typically consecrated 12 years to politics before accessing parliament. This figure rose to a whopping 18 years in 2012, increasing the time spent in various political positions by 50%. It was this queue, which had been constantly increasing over the last four decades, that the 2017 novices “jumped”, and with them other candidates who avoided part of it. The former did not even have the waiting period, they were immediately thrust onto the centre of the national political stage, and the latter, who had some prior political experience, took the opportunity to save themselves a few years of patient progression. Both groups took advantage of the disruption created by Macron’s new party, and by joining its ranks, they bypassed the traditional order of succession.

This book concretely demonstrates the relevance of an analysis of the contemporary political field in terms of this waiting line. It traces the beginning of this phenomena back to the mid-1970s in France, but also in other European countries, and explains why this ordered progression has become a principle that structures access to national political positions in various countries. Then, through a comparison between elected representatives from the 2012 legislature and others from the 2017 legislature, it analyses the ambivalent effects of these waiting lines on representatives, on the political field, and ultimately, on democracy. Trading the binary opposition between “professionals” and “novices” with the concept of the waiting line means we can restrict the idea of the professional politician to those who “live off” politics. This might seem like a sheer semantic dispute, but this shift in focus reveals other important aspects of political careers.

This change in perspective helps us draw insight from works that have explored the relationship between time, duration, and their impact on individuals. Literature is filled with situations where the experience of time passing is essential to the narrative. Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* are often quoted in descriptions of the powerlessness felt by those who wait. So is Joseph K. the anti-hero in Kafka’s *The Trial*, whose attitude to the world is radically altered by his endless, aimless wait. Just as well-known and perhaps more directly linked to this question is *The Tartar Steppes* by Dino Buzzati. In this story, the soldier Giovanni Drago is sent to a garrison in an isolated fort where he can do nothing but wait for an enemy that legends suggest lies on the other side of the border, on a mountainous plateau. Over the course of the novel, the reader sees his view of the world progressively narrow as the years pass. His curiosity, his desire for change, but also his professional and family hopes are constantly scaled down to the point where the young ambitious soldier, who initially wanted to leave the camp quickly, ultimately ends up anxious at the idea of leaving the place where all his habits were forged.

His wait for an invisible enemy has become the focus of all his practices, and has taken a toll on his desires.

However, this book draws above all on social scientific research, in which an abundant literature has analysed the relationships between waiting, social status and practice. These studies are mentioned throughout the book. What sets this research apart, however, is that it seeks to identify what is specific about the waiting line, what this framework does to the practice and to the representation of the individuals it entraps. In one pioneering study, Barry Schwartz laid the foundation for sociological research on this form of social organisation (Schwarz, 1975), showing that queues are systems that reflect power relations within a society. Those who waited were most often those with the least resources. Through a range of examples, primarily Soviet shops and American airports (his two favourite illustrations), Schwartz showed that the poor waited more than anyone else. Even with time, social dynamics are refracted in daily situations. Javier Auyero later demonstrated this is a trailblazing study of the role of waiting in the disciplining of welfare recipients in Argentina (Auyero, 2012). While confirming the main results of Schwartz, he explored other dimensions of waiting, looking particularly at the way individuals reacted differently to it. Taking up the typical distinction between the duration (the subjective estimate of time passing) and time, he identified certain social determinants in the acceptance of the waiting period.

For political leaders, like in many other situations, the waiting line is not so much a concrete situation – a more or less well-ordered physical alignment of people – as it is a concept designed to reveal an otherwise invisible reality. This is the meaning that has been emphasized in other studies, such as that by Barbara Reskin and Patricia Roos, who used it to understand how women progress less quickly than men within companies (Roos and Reskin, 1990). Looking at how large US corporations deal with women, they revealed that some individuals manage to “cut in” to the line. Although they do not take the physical form of the long lines snaking outside shopfronts like in the Soviet bloc, which also received attention from sociologists<sup>10</sup>, the invisible queues they described nevertheless have an organisational pattern which some manage to avoid. The authors demonstrate the role of gender in the differential progression, as they stress the role of recruiters in selecting those to be promoted – once again according to gender principles. The lack of materiality, and thus of a clearly established and visible order, makes it easier for some individuals to progress faster than others.

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10 There is a well-developed literature on the subject of waiting lines in the ex-USSR. Among the many texts, see the partially autobiographical work by Lidiya Ginzburg, on the siege of Leningrad during the winter of 1941 (*The Blockade Diary*, Penguin Press, 1995). Another, very different literature that is particularly rich and sometimes useful on this subject lies at the intersection of different specialisations – economics, organisations theory, and the interdisciplinary sub-field of operations research. When applied, it aims to promote the best ways of having people wait (see for example Hassin and Haviv, 2003).

These studies, as well as many others, are mobilized and sometimes discussed in the following chapters. The goal is to demonstrate the relevance of analysing contemporary politics through the prism of the waiting line, and also to make this metaphorical concept more systematic. The book shows what this form of social organisation does to individuals, to their ways of seeing and doing, and to the allocation of rare goods. More specifically, I argue that these waiting lines have three clear effects that can sometimes be observed in studies on waiting, but which must be considered together. Waiting lines are spaces where individuals are *socialized*, where they are *selected*. They are also places where groups are *individualized*.

As we will see, the concept is useful in reflecting on the major transformations that have been occurring in the political field. Waiting gives individuals time to learn, to be trained in the sometimes-complex functioning of parliament, and in the rules of the political game. We can see this in the difficulties encountered by novice MPs in the first months. Because they did not have time in the waiting line, they discovered at their expense that it takes a lot of practical knowledge to perform in politics. When the line *forms*, it also *conforms*. Socialization, but also peer selection, account better than anything else for the increasing homogeneity in both the profiles and actions often observed. The existence of a waiting line might provide fresh explanations for what has often been condemned since the 1980s as the “*pensée unique*,” a common view held beyond party lines about what ought to be done. The chain of interdependence in which representatives – from the local level to the highest national levels – find themselves, produces conformity and restricts the space of possibilities.

Similarly, the uncertain waiting period that characterises the candidates’ situation has led to a selection process, which itself is a powerful driving force in the oft-attested social homogenisation of the political class, whether in France or elsewhere. From the selection of successors by party leaders, and the self-selection that leads to elites distancing themselves from unstable and low-income activities, the concentration of upper middle class individuals among representatives can be explained by this recruitment process that is as subtle as it is effective.



Finally, waiting lines tend to individualize groups. They are certainly not anarchical spaces, devoid of any form of organization. Quite the contrary, ethnographies of queues have demonstrated how they are complex social objects heavily regulated by norms, including solidarity. But their ordered, hierarchical, and precarious structure does not transform them into instances prone to produce a common interest. They differentiate more than they empower, they antagonize more than they unify. This was perfectly illustrated when ambitious young politicians from both the left and the right broke ranks to join Emmanuel Macron in his victorious campaign, thus turning their backs on their bosses and mentors to seize this opportunity to significantly speed up their career.

## **Outline of the book**

This book takes us deep into politics, both past and present, while illustrating the merits of the concept of the waiting line. Chapter 1 starts in the midst of the action, with a presentation of the French political situation in 2017. It analyses the renewed success of the criticism against career politicians in light of the long-term transformations that had occurred in political careers, both in France and abroad. Chapter 2 looks back at the rupture introduced by the 2017 election. Was it a people's revolt, as the new president's supporters liked to say, or was the *grand soir* of French politics just a palace revolution? Here again, historical perspectives and statistical data provide useful elements to address this question, while at the same time responding to the pressing question of whether French politics has become more "professionalised"? Chapter 3 addresses the central question of the role of experience in politics. Using original quantitative data and a little-used yet promising machine learning method, it proposes a representation of a hierarchical and differentiated parliamentary space. These elements show how novices were relegated to unimportant positions, and the preservation of classical hierarchies between types of elected officials, which are then supported by more qualitative analyses. Chapter 4 dissects the experience of the novices after their abrupt emergence onto the national political stage. Like bodies immersed in a milieu they were not familiar with, they serve as analysers in action within this highly codified space. Their stories collected in the early years of this legislature are rich with information about the structures and daily texture of politics. They also show how the past trajectory in the waiting line determines the experience that people have of politics. Finally, Chapter 5 asks, if political activity is so hard and so demanding, why – and who – does it attract? If it is not for the money, nor for the power – these two usual suspects are easily ruled out, then when. It then lays out a sociological explanation for what is often treated, in a pop-psychological fashion, as an addiction to power.