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SOCIAL MEDIA AND FRENCH SOCIETY
INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 2017 FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

French political actors and their campaign strategists have been hugely active in online campaigning since 2007. At that time, Nicolas Sarkozy set up his own partially interactive TV channel to which his supporters contributed. However, the undisputed leader was Ségolène Royal who created her own online social network *Désirs d'avenir*. In 2012, all (with one exception) candidates campaigned online through websites and social media. The online presence of all candidates intensified during the 2017 campaign. Although the supply side of online communication is of a very high standard, it nonetheless retains a top-down communication style with limited interactivity between political actors and the general population. The audience for this type of communication is also growing. The increase is visible in the number of people who follow political actors on social media which has tripled in the last five years. The survey data shows that more and more French people engage in online political activities. However, the increase is not spectacular and only two out of ten French people get political information via Facebook and one out of ten post on political issues.

Metholodogy: In this paper we use waves 4, 10 and 11 from the *Enquête électorale française* which were carried out in May 2016, January and February 2017. We also use data from the survey 'Mediapolis 2012' by Thierry Vedel carried out in March 2012 on a representative sample of French people, N=2626. All data were gathered in online surveys representative of Internet users and are not weighted.

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Internet and the social media have existed within the political sphere since the late 1990s. The first media buzz on the potential of an online presence to attract both small donations and supporters/voters appeared during the 2004 US presidential campaign led by Howard Dean. Later, with the intense social media presence and interactivity of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, a new sense of optimism for increased civic engagement of those previously not active began to make its presence felt. The rather positive visions of the power of online communication were somehow overshadowed by Trump's campaign and his hyperactive presence on Twitter. Interestingly, the civic engagement that was enthusiastically accepted during Obama's campaign was criticized or blamed for the populist victory of the Trump campaign. Traditional media blamed social media platforms (namely Facebook and Twitter) for creating filter bubbles, diminishing exposure to opposing views and circulating 'fake news' – with, as a consequence, the rise of populist candidates. Research on

the 2016 US Presidential election found[1] that those who passively received information via social media were more likely to vote for the Republican populist candidate than those who actively posted or commented on political issues on social media; the effect was especially strong for Trump voters.

Even if the European and French political scenes seem to be more reticent vis-à-vis the new media phenomena, social media and communication through internet have now become almost 'banal'[2] . After the 2005 European Constitution referendum when the 'No' vote won, the 2007 Presidential campaign witnessed the growing role of the internet in campaign strategies and 2012 ushered in the use of new platforms – the social media. The importance of online communication was visible also in the increase of campaign spending by certain candidates (for example, the centre-right candidate (Sarkozy) from 3% in 2007 to 6% in 2012, and the Front National 0.3% to 3%[3]).
By the end of the 2012 campaign, nine candidates had a total of 1, 034, 622 followers[4] on Facebook and 713,000 followers on Twitter. In 2017, at the beginning of the official campaign, two weeks before the first ballot, 11 candidates had 3, 226, 992 Facebook and 4, 209, 063 Twitter followers.
The candidates also intensified their social media campaigns. In 2012, from the date when the official list of candidates who would compete in the election was announced until the official beginning of the campaign – two weeks before the election, the candidates made 569 posts on Facebook (63 on average per candidate); in 2017 during the same period the figure doubled: candidates made 1,318 posts (120 on average per candidate).

Research on new media concentrates on three main theoretical approaches. First, *the digital divide* approach[5] focuses primarily on access to the internet, and subsequently on the opportunity for users to obtain political information via online sources, and their ability to do so. Online political information may be deliberately sought by active citizens or, for those less interested in politics, may be obtained by random exposure to news published by friends or people followed. The second approach, *'politics as usual'*[6] assumes that online communication still favors large parties or prominent candidates, who have a comparative advantage in terms of resources (financial and human). Thus, both within traditional (through coverage in traditional media) and online campaigning the large parties will perform better, will have a higher potential to attract new followers, new engaged community members and consequently potential new voters. The increasing professionalization of available online communication and resources means that smaller parties have less online visibility and are thus not in a position to by-pass traditional media in their attempts to reach new voters. Finally, the *'mobilisation'* approach looks at whether online communication, especially via social media[7] - characterized by interactivity and ease of access - attracts new groups of otherwise non-politicized citizens to political and civic engagement.

[1] Jacob GROSHEK and Karolina KOC-MICHALSKA, « Helping populism win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 US election campaign », *Information, Communication & Society* (2017), DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1329334, 1-19.

[2] Karolina KOC-MICHALSKA and Thierry VEDEL, « Les pratiques informationnelles durant la campagne présidentielle de 2012 », Pascal Perrineau (ed.), *Le Vote normal : Les élections présidentielle et législatives d'avril-juin 2012*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013, 15-27.

[3] Karolina KOC-MICHALSKA, Rachel GIBSON et Thierry VEDEL, « Online Campaigning in France, 2007–2012: Political Actors and Citizens in the Aftermath of the Web.2.0 Evolution », *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* 2014, 11:2, 220-244.

[4] Karolina KOC-MICHALSKA and Oliver VALLEE (2017), « Les élections présidentielles : un événement politique en ligne. Les acteurs politiques et leur performance sur Facebook lors des élections présidentielles françaises de 2012 », *Science de la société*, May 2017.

[5] Pippa NORRIS, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.

[6] Michael MARGOLIS and David RESNICK, *Politics as usual: The cyberspace revolution*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.

[7] Shelley BOULIANNE, « Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research », *Information, Communication & Society*, 2015, Vol. 18, n°5, 524-538.

I – Social media use during the 2017 election

According to a World Bank statistic, in 2015 85% of the French population had internet access. This represents strong growth from 66% in 2007[8]. In January 2017, 66% of French internet users declared that they had an active Facebook profile and 18% had a Twitter account (CEVIPOF, W10). Such growth does not seem particularly substantial compared to 2012 when 62% had Facebook and 12% were on Twitter (Mediapolis 2012).

One visible change in social media use is in the age structure of users. However, this seems to be rather a cohort effect rather than an ageing effect. In 2017, one-third of the population aged 18-34 had Twitter profiles and eight out of ten had a Facebook profile. More than age, it is rather the level of education that produces an important gap in the use of social media among French internet users, with the more educated (bac and higher) being considerably more likely to be present on social media; this gap has grown in the last five years.

Table 1: Use of social media according to socio-demographic characteristics
Source: 2012 data from the Mediapolis study, 2017 data from the CEVIPOF ENEF Wave 1 and 10

	TW`12	TW`17	FB`12	FB`17
Age				
18-24	21.5	26	83	80
25-34	15	24	75	82
35-49	10	19	59	70
50-64	9	13	49	58
65+	6	11	46	52
Gender				
Male	15	20	59	64
Female	9.5	16	65	68
Education				
<bac	8	12.5	57.5	58.5
bac	12	15	62	60.5
bac+	15	20	64.5	70

Note : the table should be read as follows : Among males,15% have a Twitter account

1.1. Social media use for politics: a short-term perspective

In January 2017, 45% of the French Internet users declared that they sought political and/or campaign information online. A considerably fewer number searched for information on the candidates' websites. However, as the campaign unfolded, this number grew from 11% in May 2016 to 15 % in January 2017.
Respectively, one-third of social media users received political information via Facebook or Twitter. As Table 2 indicates, there was a natural growth of around two percentage points for each activity on social media (as the numbers correspond to the same respondents) among those who are active on social media. This suggests that interest in information about the campaign obtained online or via social media did not increase substantially before the start of the official campaign.

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[8] http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2?end=2015&locations=FR&start=1990&view=chart.

Table 2: Short-term change in online activities among French internet and social media users

Websites N=15514	May 2016	January 2017
Searched for political information online	44	45
Visited candidates' websites	11	15
Facebook N= 8993		
Received political information	27	29
Posted political information	12	14
Followed political profile (party or candidates)	11	12
Twitter N=2168		
Followed campaign information	24	28
Tweeted about campaign	22	23

Note: N respectively indicates the number of respondents in general, the number of users with a Facebook profile and the number of users with a Twitter account.

Unsurprisingly, if we look at online political activity in general (those who performed at least one online political activity, Table 3), we notice that political variables such as political ideology (being more to the left or the right) and opinions on how democracy functions in France have low or no impact on online political activity. By contrast, the *usual suspects* are more visible. Among those with a higher level of education one half of them are politically active online, while this figure drops to just ten percent among those with lower levels of education.

While the fact of leaning to the political left or right does not have an impact on levels of online activity, the degree of politicization does play a role and those who declare themselves to be 'neither left nor right' are less likely to be politically active on line (minus 11 percentage points). The strongest divide remains between those who are and those who are not interested in politics. Six out of ten people interested in politics engage in online activities, while only three in ten of those not interested do so. Finally, the age structure of online political activity resembles the structure within traditional (offline) political activities, with older users participating relatively more than younger users.

Table 3. Online political activities by social and political characteristics

	Online political activity (%)
Age	
18-24	42
25-34	41
35-49	42
50-64	49
65+	55
Gender	
Male	50
Female	42
Education	
<bac	38
bac	41
bac<	49
Interested in politics	63
Not interested in politics	28
Democracy functions well in France	48
Democracy does not function well in France	42
Left-leaning	52
Right-leaning	48
Neither right nor left	37
Note: the table should be read as follow "Among males 50% engage in at least one online political activity"	

1.2. Social media use for politics: a long-term perspective

A stable increase in online political activity can be observed between the 2012 and the 2017 presidential elections. A comparison of respondents in two different surveys carried out a few weeks before the first round of each Presidential election[9] indicates a 10 percentage point growth in the number of people who searched for information online on French politics and the election campaign, an increase in those who performed passive (received) or active (posted) political activities on Facebook (by five and three percentage points respectively), a doubling of those who tweeted about political issues (though the number remains small, from 2 to 4 percent of internet users).

Table 4: Long-term change among online activities French internet users 2012-2017

	2012	2017
Searched for political information online	35	45
Visited candidates' websites	17	15
Facebook		
Received political information	14	19
Posted political information	6	9
Followed political profile (party or candidates)		9
Twitter		
Followed campaign information	4	5
Tweeted about the campaign	2	4
N	2,626	16,166

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[9] Mediapolis 2012 and ENEF 2017. The calculations are done for the entire sample of internet users.

1.3. Social media use and political identification before elections

Supporters of candidates for the two main parties, the *Parti socialiste* and *Les Républicains* were the most active searchers for political information online and the most likely to follow the campaign on Twitter.
However, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's potential voters were the most enthusiastically engaged in social media campaigning. 23% of them posted political information on Facebook (which is six percentage points more than supporters of any other candidate) and 15% followed Mélenchon's profile on Facebook. They were also the most actively engaged in tweeting about campaign issues. Our data set does not show exactly whose social media profile is followed, what information is obtained or where the comments are posted. The only thing the data set shows is which candidate's supporters are the most likely to engage in these different activities.

It can be observed that social media are not a play-ground for the smaller of less prominent candidates. Less than 10% of Arthaud's or Poutou's supporters followed the political social media accounts of any candidate (not necessarily theirs) or visited candidate websites. It is interesting to note that in the survey data, Le Pen's potential supporters were not that active, whereas she drew the largest community to her network profiles (see the following tables).

Table 5: Online activities according to voting intention

	Arthaud	Poutou	Mélenchon	Hamon	Macron	Fillon	Dupont-Aignan	Le Pen	Will not vote	Will cast a blank vote
Websites N=15033										
Searched pol. info	40	43	47	**54**	51	**54**	49	35	26	30
Visited candidate websites	6	9	21	15	15	20	17	14	7	7
Facebook N= 10150										
Received info	16	33	**39**	32	26	30	28	28	25	15
Posted info	8	11	**23**	17	10	13	11	14	5	6
Followed profile	8	9	**15**	9	8	10	7	9	3	3
Twitter N= 2675										
Followed campaign info	19	15	29	**30**	29	**30**	19	24	13	16
Tweeted about campaign.	19	19	26	21	21	25	16	22	8	13

Note: The table should be read as follows: "Among those who declared they would vote for Arthaud, 40% searched for political information online". The data comes from W10 Online Political Activities and W11bis Voting Intentions. N are general respondents (websites) or number of people having a Facebook or Twitter account in W10.

II - Candidates strategies on social media

On the first day of the official electoral campaign, Marine Le Pen had the largest number of Facebook followers (since the profile was established, Table 6) with 1.3 million followers. Jean-Luc Mélenchon was in second place with over 850,000 followers. A similar pattern was present on Twitter, while the opposite was true for YouTube, where Mélenchon was clearly in the lead with more than 280,000 followers. Some of the minor candidates decided not to set up a YouTube or Instagram account. While the two leading candidates drew sizeable communities to them, none of the other candidates managed to do so and lagged far behind them.

The size of the community provides an important measurement since (with some exceptions such as journalists, researchers or potential trolls) following a profile may indicate endorsement of a candidate and a willingness to receive her/his posts on the user's news feed. However, engagement remains the more important measurement (liking, sharing and commenting) within the profile activity. Such activity does not necessarily stem from members of the community (followers) but may also result from the post going viral (e.g. some internet users liked a post by candidates simply because their friends liked or shared it).

Figure 1 shows a simple count of the mixture of activities within each profile. On Twitter, the number of activities exceeds the number of followers only slightly for Fillon and Asselineau, and substantially, almost twice the number, for Hamon. No other candidate has higher numbers of active users than their community size, which may indicate that their posts have less potential to receive attention from outside of their 'sure' supporters. However, it is on Facebook that communication becomes truly viral and surpasses that of the community. Dupont-Aignan's posts were the most to go viral (over 300% of his community size), followed by Asselineau (290% more activity than community size).

Table 6. Social media followers

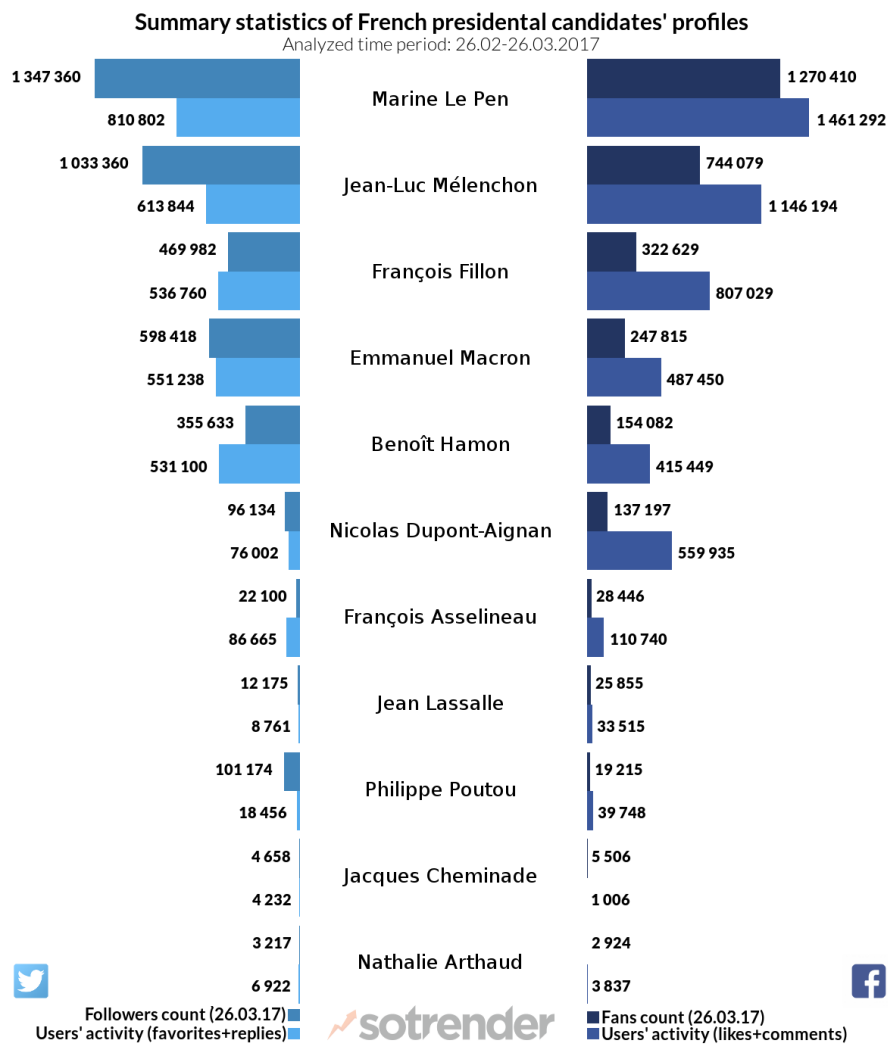|	FB followers	TW followers	YouTube followers	Instagram followers
Nathalie Arthaud	5 442	6 193	468	
Philippe Poutou	74 103	124 844		
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	855 808	1 070 491	281 682	15 088
Benoît Hamon	164 834	366 359	6 951	11 073
Emmanuel Macron	271 378	631 893	12 986	27 923
François Fillon	337 741	488 290	6 348	14 607
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan	140 653	99 850	4 783	1 319
Marine Le Pen	1 285 886	1 370 477	18 864	52 082
Jacques Cheminade	6 593	5 919	1 301	
François Asselineau	40 324	25 526	2 463	
Jean Lassalle	44 230	19 221	1 854	

Note: Number of followers as of 10.04.17, the start of the official campaign.

Another way to analyze Facebook profiles is to group users according to intensity of activity. We have created five different groups[10]: Hyper-active supporters (those who engage extensively in all activities, "ambassadors" of the brand), loyal supporters (those who engage moderately in all activities), loyal likers (those who systematically 'like' the content of the profile but never share or participate in discussion), one-time supporters (those who 'like' only once), and finally discursive visitors – users who participate in discussions by commenting or share the content but never 'like' anything on the profile (neither profiles nor posts).

Figures 1 and 2 show these groups of users in 2012 and 2017. As can be seen, there were far fewer discursive visitors in 2017 than in 2012. In 2012, the lowest number of discursive visitors represented 18% of all visits, while in 2017, it plummeted to 6%, with the highest percentage reaching 70% and 16% respectively. Although these data require further analysis, it can be hypothesized that there is a limit to discussion, where social media users do not visit and most of all do not engage in conversation with the profiles that they do not support (never 'like'), which may possibly support the theory of the filter bubble. On the other hand, the number of hyper-active supporters remains very similar within both time periods. Clearly, *clickism* (singular or multiple liking) took over Facebook activity.

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[10] Karolina KOC-MICHALSKA, Darren LILLEKER, Tomasz MICHALSKI and Jeffrey ZAJAC, « Facebook affordances: communication strategies and fan engagement. European political parties in the 2014 European parliamentary election », Presentation American Political Science Association (APSA), 2016.

Figure 1. Levels of online engagement per candidate

Summary statistics of French presidental candidates' profiles
Analyzed time period: 26.02-26.03.2017

Candidate	Twitter Followers count (26.03.17)	Twitter Users' activity (favorites+replies)	Facebook Fans count (26.03.17)	Facebook Users' activity (likes+comments)
Marine Le Pen	1 347 360	810 802	1 270 410	1 461 292
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	1 033 360	613 844	744 079	1 146 194
François Fillon	469 982	536 760	322 629	807 029
Emmanuel Macron	598 418	551 238	247 815	487 450
Benoît Hamon	355 633	531 100	154 082	415 449
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan	96 134	76 002	137 197	559 935
François Asselineau	22 100	86 665	28 446	110 740
Jean Lassalle	12 175	8 761	25 855	33 515
Philippe Poutou	101 174	18 456	19 215	39 748
Jacques Cheminade	4 658	4 232	5 506	1 006
Nathalie Arthaud	3 217	6 922	2 924	3 837

sotrender

Source: 2017 presidential election, Raport Audencia Business School, http://en.calameo.com/read/00013720650a92ff1664e

Figure 2: 2012 Facebook activity by users
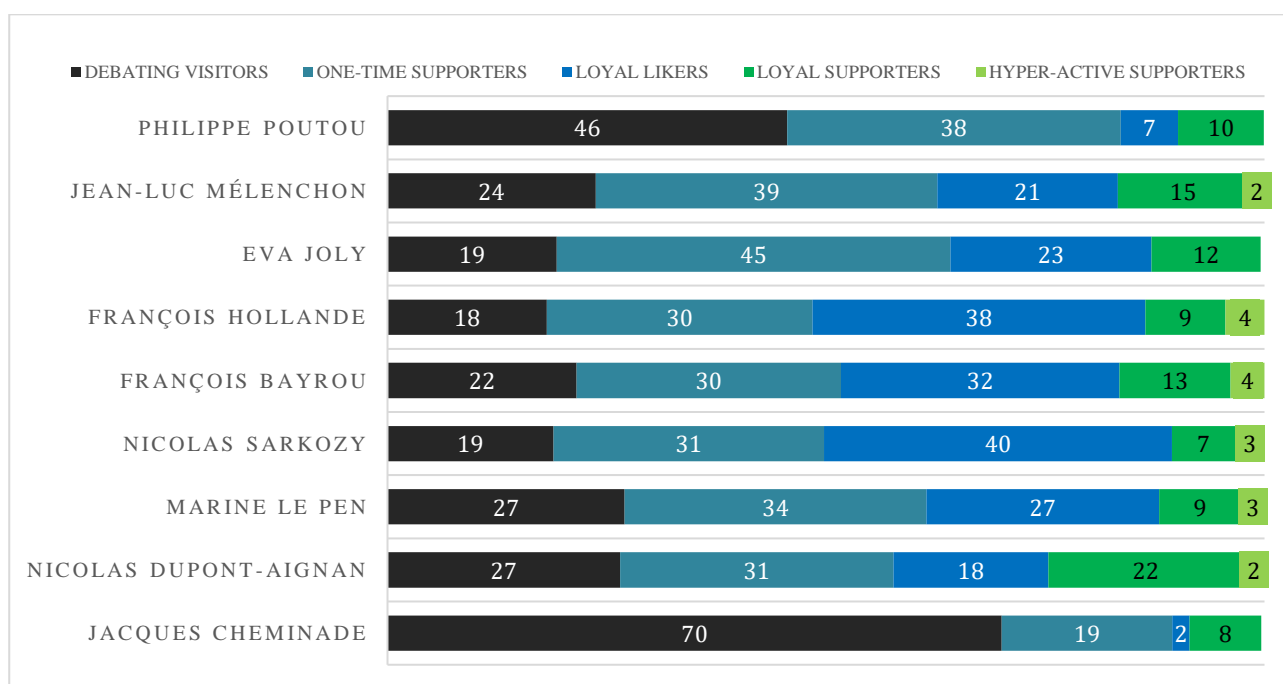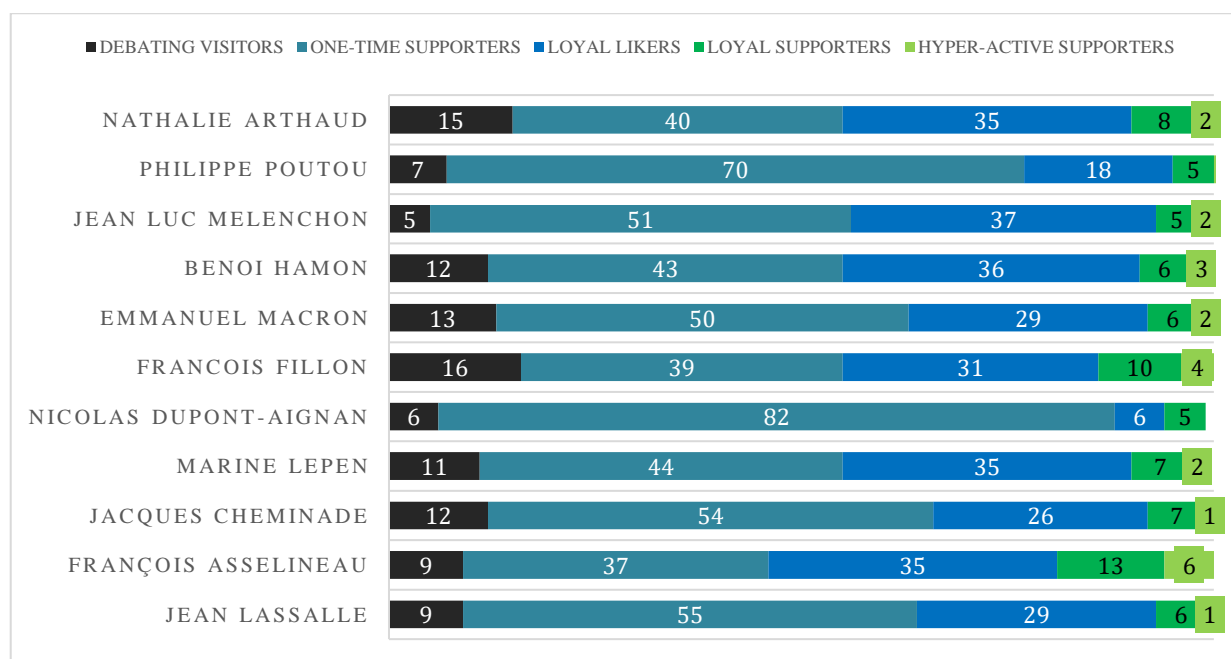Source: Koc-Michalska and Sotrender.com. Data from March – April 2012

	DEBATING VISITORS	ONE-TIME SUPPORTERS	LOYAL LIKERS	LOYAL SUPPORTERS	HYPER-ACTIVE SUPPORTERS
PHILIPPE POUTOU	46	38	7	10	
JEAN-LUC MÉLENCHON	24	39	21	15	2
EVA JOLY	19	45	23	12	
FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE	18	30	38	9	4
FRANÇOIS BAYROU	22	30	32	13	4
NICOLAS SARKOZY	19	31	40	7	3
MARINE LE PEN	27	34	27	9	3
NICOLAS DUPONT-AIGNAN	27	31	18	22	2
JACQUES CHEMINADE	70	19	2	8	

Figure 3: 2017 Facebook activity by users
Source: Koc-Michalska and Sotrender.com

	DEBATING VISITORS	ONE-TIME SUPPORTERS	LOYAL LIKERS	LOYAL SUPPORTERS	HYPER-ACTIVE SUPPORTERS
NATHALIE ARTHAUD	15	40	35	8	2
PHILIPPE POUTOU	7	70	18	5	
JEAN LUC MELENCHON	5	51	37	5	2
BENOI HAMON	12	43	36	6	3
EMMANUEL MACRON	13	50	29	6	2
FRANCOIS FILLON	16	39	31	10	4
NICOLAS DUPONT-AIGNAN	6	82	6	5	
MARINE LEPEN	11	44	35	7	2
JACQUES CHEMINADE	12	54	26	7	1
FRANÇOIS ASSELINEAU	9	37	35	13	6
JEAN LASSALLE	9	55	29	6	1

III - France in international comparison

The internet penetration rate is higher in the UK with 92%[11] and in the US with 88.6% of the population having access to internet. Compared to France, a higher proportion of the general population has a Facebook account in the US and in the UK (Table 7) have a Facebook account. American citizens are most likely to engage in social media activities, with one-fourth of them regularly taking part in politically oriented activity. The British are perhaps more active than the French in posting political posts or commenting on social media, however, levels of interest in following politicians online are similar.

Table 7: Political activities on social media during UK 2015, US 2016 and FR 2017 election

	UK 2015	US 2016	FR2017
Facebook account	59	62	51
Received political information	n.a .	25	19
Posted political information	16	25	9
Followed political profile (party or candidates)	10	25	9

Note: For Facebook account – number of general population. FB data from www.internetworldstats.com; Social media activities from 'Political participation project' by Darren Lilleker at Bournemouth University realised by Opinium research 24 to 27 February 2015 on N=1982 representative for United Kingdom. 'Social media and political participation' by Jacob Groshek at Boston University realized by Qualtrics on a representative sample of US citizens N=1105.

Similarly, if we turn towards the social media communities of political actors, it becomes clear that American politicians have the largest numbers of endorsements and followers. Nonetheless, the highest numbers tend to be reserved to the most prominent politicians. Table 8 shows the number of community members (fans or profile followers) as well as the shares by those communities among internet users per country. Barack Obama and Donald Trump are entirely unique with their communities representing a substantial number of internet users in the United States (however, they have a substantial number of community members originating from other countries). Other communities are comparable to each other: for example Sanders drew 2% of American internet users to his Facebook and Twitter profile, the same percentage as Le Pen.

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[11] http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe , March 2017.

Table 8: Social media communities in the United States, United Kingdom and France
Source: www.internetworldstats.com

	Facebook	Twitter	FB (%) of internet users	TW (%) of internet users
M. Rubio	1 453 433	2 220 003	.05	.07
H. Clinton	14 021 273	14 021 646	5	5
B. Sanders	5 069 000	6 110 929	2	2
D. Trump	21 910 542	27 791 129	8	10
T. Cruz	2 143 539	2 455 919	.07	.08
B. Obama	54 646 671	86 735 346	19	30
T. May	336 693	278 003	.05	.04
E. Miliband	145 248	585 934	.02	.09
J. Corbyn	834 913	808 378	1	1
N. Sturgeon	292 619	630 804	.04	.01
J.-L. Mélenchon	855 808	1 033 360	1	2
B. Hamon	164 834	355 633	.02	.06
E. Macron	271 378	598 418	.04	1
F. Fillon	337 741	469 982	.06	.08
M. Le Pen	1 285 886	1 347 360	2	2

Conclusion

Social media have become an everyday campaign tool in France. Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that they remain more intensively used by the prominent players on the political scene. The minor candidates do not use social media, or rather, as a result of lower numbers of followers are unable to reach wider groups within society and potential voters. In this respect, politics as usual (Margolis and Resnick, 2000) remains the dominant situation. International comparison of online activity by the most prominent politicians does not indicate major differences between French and other European (notably UK) political actors.

French internet users have not substantially changed their habits and no important increase in online engagement was observed during the 2017 campaign. Those already engaged in politics, particularly those who declare an interest in politics and have concrete political views continue to remain the most active on social media. Further statistical analyses are needed to understand to what extent social media involvement increased the level of interest in politics among otherwise non-politicized users (the effect that was found in 2012).

Finally, the discussion (which mostly surfaced after the 2016 American election) on online filter bubbles and echo chambers is also reflected in our preliminary data, as we observed an increase in clickism (liking) and a decrease in discussion over the internet.

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L'Enquête électorale française

Le Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po (CEVIPOF) est le laboratoire de référence pour l'étude des attitudes politiques et l'analyse du comportement électoral. De novembre 2015 à juin 2017, le CEVIPOF déploie un dispositif inédit de recherche et notamment l'Enquête électorale française dans la perspective de l'élection présidentielle de 2017.

En partenariat avec IPSOS et *Le Monde*, un panel de 25 000 Français, un autre de 1 000 jeunes de 16 à 18 ans et un dernier de 2 500 personnes non inscrites sur les listes électorales, sont interrogés 16 fois durant vingt mois.

L'Enquête électorale française, à l'instar des recherches conduites précédemment aux États-Unis, au Canada ou au Royaume-Uni, répond à quatre grandes questions :

> Quels sont les facteurs individuels et contextuels susceptibles d'ancrer un choix électoral ?

> Les variables dites lourdes (socio-démographie, religion et patrimoine) suffisent-elles à expliquer les choix électoraux ? Qu'en est-il des ressorts psychologiques du vote (émotions et personnalité) ?

> Quelle est l'influence des changements personnels, familiaux, professionnels ou encore géographiques sur le vote ?

> Enfin, quelles sont les formes de mobilisation politique des primo-votants ?

Pour ces recherches menées dans le cadre de l'Enquête électorale française, le CEVIPOF bénéficie du soutien du ministère de l'Intérieur.

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