A British to French ‘Liaison Romantique’- Assessing French Presidential Statecraft Through the Case Study of Nicolas Sarkozy

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Abstract

This article makes the case for employing the Statecraft approach (with origins in British scholarship) to assess French presidents. This marks a unique opportunity for both cross-fertilisation and the development of French literature on its leadership which, it is argued here, relies heavily on the American precedent of focusing on the individual president and his ‘character’. It will be proposed that, despite the differences that exist between political leadership in parliamentary Britain and semi-presidential France, the Statecraft approach is able to function on the basis of their similarities; that politicians of both stripes principally seek to win elections and maintain an aura of governing competence, against the backdrop of either a favourable or unfavourable environment. In particular, the Statecraft approach serves as a useful operationalizing tool with which to aid researchers in making both accurate and ‘fairer’ assessments of leaders. It steers away from the tendency in French and American literature’s emphasise on the ‘mythical attachment’ to a leader’s ‘narrative’ or personality/style and bonds with his/her people, and instead encourages a broader and more flexible understanding of the broader political clique with an added focus on the ‘pragmatics of winning’. Thus, through the utilisation of the Statecraft approach to assess the case study of the Sarkozy administration (2007-2012), it will be seen just how useful the British-developed approach is in advancing French scholarship in understanding and assessing its leaders.

Key Words

British Politics, Comparative Politics, French Politics, Nicolas Sarkozy, Political Leadership, Political Science, Statecraft.
“Il se passe toujours quelque chose à L’Elysée”- Duhamel (2012: 1) (“There is always something going on at the Elysée”)

1/Introduction

On the 16th May, 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy was inaugurated as the 6th Président de la Ve République de France, after winning a convincing victory against the opposition having led what most commentators agreed was a well-planned, well-executed campaign devoid of gaffes and full of enthusiasm that won over the French people. Yet the ‘Sarko honeymoon’ was “over before it started” (Gaffney 2012: 3). Indeed, Sarkozy’s term was belittled by a campaign now reflecting an increasing ‘droitinisation’ of policies (shifting towards the extreme right- Jouanno 2012) and an economic approach- symbolised by the much protested against ‘bouclier fiscal’ (tax shield)- which clashed with the new age of austerity (Okrent 2012). The French electors had shouted adieu Nicolas. And yet, Sarkozy’s defeat cannot be judged so easily, nor necessarily so harshly. Indeed, whilst his defeat seemed inevitable to many (Chrisafis 2012), conversely others believed in his success (Bernard 2012); his defeat was marginal (51.63% for Hollande and 48.37% for Sarkozy) and few can forget the spectacular performance he gave in 2007. The challenge, therefore, stems from the knowledge of Sarkozy’s term, knowing where his leadership was ineffective and even effective. Indeed, it is prudent to inquire, just how exactly should we assess political leaders? In what light should we view the presidency of Sarkozy? Should we adopt a lens that considers his personality and the so-called French political romantic myth between French people and their president, or should we perhaps consider the wider political executive and their electoral chances based on pragmatic skill, or should we simply forgive him and say Lady Fortuna abandoned Sarkozy when the first gusts of economic turmoil began to spread across Europe, leaving the ‘can-do’ hyper-president ‘nul’?

The debate on political leadership is a pertinent one; understanding why we would want to assess our leaders, it seems almost intuitive that we would want to understand and possibly try to ‘improve’ the leadership of our leaders (Blondel 1987: 1-2; Greenstein 2009a: 6). Several complications arise when we ask how to assess the tenure of a political leader. First, there is the ‘essentially contested’ nature of the definition of political leadership (Elgin 1995: 5); is it synonymous with a single leader (e.g. a president), or does it include a wider ‘court’ of influential actors (e.g. the wider core executive). Second, with which lens do we assess? Which criteria do we adopt and- as political scientists- claim to appeal to objective standards?
Indeed, do such objective, almost universal criteria- or ‘benchmarks’- exist, and moreover can we apply them across various (and different) political systems? Third, can our assessment of political leadership escape our own ideological or normative assumptions? Presently, literature converges on a strong American bias which lends itself to a ‘presidential’ approach to political leadership, resulting in a methodology and assessment that is arguably too much anchored in American terminology and concepts that manifest into an inaccurate representation of political leadership in other countries.

The aim of this article will be twofold; first, it will be argued that French literature regarding its assessments of its political leaders is undermined by a certain American precedent. By focusing on ‘presidentialism’, scholars have attended to a false image of a powerful president, and their subsequent analyses on presidential ‘character’ have been misleading with regards to the more complex arrangement of political leadership found in France. Second, having identified the ‘problem of the president’, this article will appraise a newly emerging methodology of assessing political leaders, that of the Statecraft approach recently adapted by Buller and James (2008; 2011; 2012). This British-developed method will be detailed and then operationalised to assess the recent Sarkozy presidency 2007-2012. In contrast to presidential ‘personality studies’, Statecraft offers fresh insights into a more accurate reality of French political leadership, taking account of both the complex mix of actors involved (the president, the party leaders, the cabinet etc.) whilst also being attentive to the pragmatic details of leadership i.e. staying in power (as opposed to accounts of ‘character’ or ‘narratives’). Ultimately, despite the differences between a parliamentary UK and semi-presidential France, the Statecraft approach is able to function on the similarity that politicians of all stripes nonetheless, “will all still be concerned with winning votes” (Buller and James 2011: 24-5).

2/What is Political Leadership?

American Literature- Setting a Precedence

Whilst France remains a distinct entity from America, it was arguably American scholars who most invested their interest in their presidents to create a body of literature with which to assess and judge them. Indeed, just as the global spotlight is still focused on the American president, so too are theories and methodologies of assessing political leaders influenced by
the American example. To understand French literature concerning its political leaders, it is thus necessary to understand its principal import; the American president and his ‘character’.

Perhaps one of the earliest and simplest methodologies to emerge is that of opinion polls or ‘expert surveys’ of historians and political scientists that attempt to rate and ‘rank’ political leaders amongst their peers. Popularised by Schlesinger Snr. (1948), he asked respondents to ‘rank’ US Presidents from ‘Great’ to ‘Failure’. Whilst Schlesinger specified that assessments should be based on “the performance of these men as president”, no other criterion was specified, and thus respondents were free to select their own. Buller and James (2012: 2) note that, since Schlesinger, “a range of other scholars have introduced longer and more precise list of indicators in an attempt to further quantify and rate presidents according to league tables”. Yet, whilst this approach has the advantage of ease and simplicity, the methodology has been subject to a range of criticisms. Noting the recurring absence of specific criteria, Faber and Faber criticise the failure of surveys to operationalise and therefore clarify their criteria, which they argue obscure the precise value of the exercise (2000: 3). Thus, Buller and James (2011: 3) contend that it is difficult to elucidate the precise meaning of what is being asked for, and what follows is that each respondent’s interpretation of ‘leadership skills’ mean, potentially, completely different things. So, “Whilst an impression of objectivity is given, strengthened by the allocation of numerical scores to each leader, all evaluation exercises will inevitably be subjective. Perhaps the best we can hope for is that our (subjective) criteria offer up a fair and realistic ‘test’ for chief executives. Indeed, “an aggregate score across a range of indicators is arguably a too superficial approach to this subject area” (2011: 3). Theakston and Gill thus call for a “more historically nuanced and contextualised analysis of individual leaders, the ingredients of political/governmental effectiveness and the conditions for success or failure” (2006: 212).

Seeking such a nuanced study, scholars have attempted to create individual lists with which to assess leaders in a more ‘detailed’ analysis. According to Greenstein (2009: 6), the role of scholars who assess presidents is to help make them ‘more successful’, whereby, “Presidents must steep themselves in a knowledge of history…to avoid the mistakes of the past…to improve on them”. Barber (1972) set forth criteria which were concerned with the ‘character’ of presidents, in which he set out to understand the benefits and drawbacks of different ‘active’ or ‘passive’ presidents. Neustadt (1990), meanwhile, developed his condition of ‘presidential power’, distinguishing between the powers granted to the president by the
constitution and the *power* that he was able to attain through a shrewd balancing of his situation (1990: Chp1). A ‘good’ leader was based on his efforts at *persuasion*, how he successfully managed his relations between the various checks and balances presented by the constitution in order to ‘make his stamp on the political system’ (Greenstein 2009: 6).

Drawing on from this literature, Greenstein’s ‘*Presidential Difference*’ offers a methodology in what he defines as a culmination of the work of Barber, Neustadt et al. to assess the president on the analytical premise that he “who occupies the nation’s highest office can have profound repercussions” (2009: 2). This draws on the theoretical lineage of the ‘great man’, translated in the guise of the ‘exceptional’ power circumstances that the president finds himself in vis-à-vis other political actors and the political system. Greenstein is thus explicit in his preference for agency over structure, and the president is seen as the most important actor. These basic presumptions established, Greenstein proceeds to analyse the ‘great’ leader in his own terms, that is, he seeks to understand the *personality* of the leader that shapes and accounts for a (un) successful leadership. Greenstein presents six somewhat loosely-defined criteria; public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive skill and emotional intelligence. Although he states that there is no hierarchical order to his criteria, he does imply that there is when he asserts the significance of emotional intelligence or rather, the absence of it entails, “the most destructive weapon in human experience” (2009: 230), and that it was necessary that a president ensures, “the firm taming of the soul” (Weber in Greenstein 2009: 6). In his analysis, Greenstein attempts to discuss the ‘means’ as opposed to the ‘ends’, furthermore not ranking presidents but instead valuing their unique experiences, commenting that, “they are all my presidents”, seeking to understand, “their weaknesses as much as their strengths” (2009: 6).

Greenstein’s methodology has been used to assess US presidents from past (2009b) to present (2001; 2009; 2011; 2012), as well as being imported by other countries, notably in the UK for assessments on Harold Wilson (Honeyman 2007) and the recent Brown Premiership (Theakston 2011). Greenstein has been praised for recognising both the importance of qualitative methodologies and the significance of the personality of the principal actor, the president. However, although these more ‘qualitative’ approaches at assessing political leadership avoid the limitations of previous quantitative methodologies, as Buller and James (2012: 537) note, “works of Greenstein and others raises different questions that need to be broached”. First, how do we address the relativity question, that is, how can we adapt a
methodology with American roots in strong ‘presidentialism’ to another political system, such as the UK, which arguably does not accommodate for its ‘collective leadership’ style (presidential versus parliamentarian). Second, do these methodologies remain insensitive towards the ‘agency versus structure’ debate (where Greenstein attaches too much significance to the president, and does not account for limitations imposed by the wider structure)? These criticisms have been defended, where both Theakston (2011) and Honeyman (2007) claim that the PM, whilst primus inter pares, remains powerful, and Greenstein’s analysis into leaders’ personalities may offer a useful insight. Buller and James (2011: 4) are less sympathetic, and note how Greenstein’s methodology- distinctively American and lacking a sophisticated vocabulary to account for the structure and agency debate- will rather “have to be revised to account for the peculiarities of governing the UK polity”.

**French Literature**

Whilst sharing similar traits in common, France is once more defined by a distinct entity and literature, and yet it remains strongly influenced by the American precedent. In terms of debates on political leadership, one useful conceptual framework is to fit the French polity between the UK (parliamentarianism) and the US (presidentialism), making for an interesting case study into the relevance of the Statecraft approach. France, in one sense, remains undefined due to the shortage of articles discussing the matter and almost ‘acceptance’ of a presidential system despite other scholars’ recourse to the term ‘semi-presidential’ (Duverger 1980; Elgie 2012) which remains essential to defining French politics. The debate finds its origins in the relationship between the fall of the IVe République and the rise of the Ve which presided over the transformation of the constitution where it was argued that an inappropriate proportion of power was vested in parliament at the expense of the executive, above all the president. The emergence of the Ve République was a response to this, and the 1958 constitution was designed to reflect the changes needed; a new list of presidential powers were added, with further constitutional reforms in 1962 granting the president increased legitimacy and power by being directly elected by (and hence directly responsible to) the people. The latter not only undermined the previous power of parliament to elect the president (and thus hold him accountable), but it furthermore legitimated the role of the

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1 Learning from the British and American example, when considering a political leader we must **recognise the bias of a methodology born to assess a particular breed**- often the American breed- and consider measures to account for it. The Statecraft approach seeks to build on these lessons.
president in the eyes of the people, thereby forging a stronger link between them (Wright 1989). Ambiguity remained, however, and a new question arose over the so-called ‘dual-executive’ and the extent of ‘cohabitation’. Besides an increase in various powers, debates focused on the extent the president himself possessed increased power, where constitutional ambiguity dictated that the PM, “shall direct the actions of government [and] be responsible for national defence [as well as] ensure the implementation of legislation…” (Article 21 in Wright 1997: 338). What emerged under the Ve République was thus a form of government that was neither strictly presidential, nor parliamentarian. The ensuing ‘semi-presidentialism’ was characterised by a new political arrangement between a new potent president and a potentially powerful PM\(^2\). Opinions diverge whereby, “It is only natural to first consider the president”, to, “It is clear that the autonomy of the Prime Minister from the President is considerably reinforced in the situation of cohabitation” (Tricot et al 1995: 322). Through the lens of ‘cohabitation’, various scholars recognise a pendulum swing of power, with periods fluctuating between Presidential strength and Prime Ministerial autonomy. Passarelli (2010) extends this, noting that, “the spectrum may range from maximum centralization-led by a president who heads a parliamentary majority- to maximum collegiality- headed by a PM who governs with other ministers” (2010: 403). However, it remains important to consider the fact that “cohabitation continues to be seen as an anomaly” (2010: 411). Consequently, he concludes that, “Institutions matter, but only to some extent”. In this view, the birth of the Ve République and its reforms has engendered the strong President that it aimed for, but his position is in part determined by the political environment at the time and the position of the Prime Minister, as much as his own ability to, “dominate the executive branch well beyond the rules of the Constitution” (Passarelli 2010: 422).

Despite the tensions found in semi-presidentialism, however, methodologies assessing French political leadership have often adopted analytical priority of the president. Specifically, the most prominent assessments rely heavily on interpretations of presidential ‘character’. Bell (2005) offers a political biography of Mitterrand, providing an analysis of a tenure that rests on his ‘character’, drawing parallels with Greenstein (2005), whilst Hewlett (2007) offers the notion of ‘Bonapartism’, analysing French presidents on the view of their centralised,

\(^2\)Ironically, whilst the term ‘semi-presidentialism’ was coined by French scholar Duverger who saw France as the archetypical case study, most French scholars have rejected, or even blatantly ignored his thesis (allowing ‘presidential’ methods of assessment). Referring furthermore to the issue of the ‘underdeveloped field’ of political leadership in France, Pasquino (2005) identifies a culture of ‘envy’ and even ‘jealousy’ in academic ranks in France.
authoritative power. Focusing furthermore on the notion of presidential ‘character’, Sutter and Immelman (2008) approach the Sarkozy presidency through a psychological lens following Greenstein’s (1992) case for the employment of ‘personality studies’, evaluating Sarkozy through his perceived dominant traits of ‘dominance, ambition and controlling’, and identifying him with ‘compensatory narcissism’. According to them, “people with this personality composite seek to counteract feelings of inferiority by creating illusions of superiority” (2008: 2). On this personality basis, they begin to draw predictions on what a Sarkozy government would have entailed, and converge on a conclusion similar to the negative effects of what Greenstein warned when discussing leaders who had an unstable ‘emotional intelligence’. Therefore, in hindsight, one could draw from Sutter and Immelman the conclusion that Sarkozy’s failure was rooted in his obsession for dominance, and this particular temperament may have encouraged him, for example, to prolong the ‘bouclier fiscal’ in the face of opposition to protect his ‘pride’, which proved to be so devastating for his popularity.

More recently, Gaffney (2012) focuses on what he defines as the ‘romantic liaison’ between the President and the French people. In his analysis of Sarkozy, Gaffney begins with an appreciation of the unfavourable ‘context’ which plagued the Sarkozy presidency. However, in searching for a means as to why he was considered a failed president, he argues that, “At the heart of Sarkozy’s misfortunes lay two problems unrelated to his policies and the recession; namely his ‘image’, and his relationship with the French” (2012: xi). Further to this, he contends that, “A constant determining feature of political life is the topsy-turvy ‘intimacy’ of the president of the Republic and the French people, with something approaching a passionate relationship between them” (2012: xi). For Sarkozy, Gaffney’s thesis rests on linking the failure in 2012 to his perceived character as being inappropriate for France’s highest office. This draws parallels with Cole’s (2012) analysis concerning the president and the presidency- the office of the presidency has certain ‘expectations’, and if the president cannot meet them then his public will be disappointed. For Cole (2012: 311), ultimately, “Sarkozy overinvested the presidential office with a personal governing style that was widely deemed- by public opinion, as well as elites- to be inappropriate given the role expectations of the French presidency”. Moreover, Cole notes that Sarkozy’s failure lied in the fact that Sarkozy himself was unable to match the changing expectations of office. In this respect, Sarkozy was perceived as interventionist, impetuous, too ‘bling’ and the ‘hyper-president’ appeared to clash with a new age of austerity and the comportment of the highest
political office in the country (Gaffney 2012: xix). For Gaffney, how this relationship evolves (or devolves) is attached to the significance of symbolism; from de Gaulle’s ‘public devotion’ to Sarkozy’s ‘impetuosity’, the French political system has to be ‘read’ in a certain way, and the president makes up the ‘grammar’ of the Ve République.

3/ The Statecraft Approach- Roots and Aims

Given this American bias towards presidentialism and ‘personality studies’, Buller and James (2008; 2011; 2012) have sought to develop a distinct methodology with roots in the British political system (‘party government’). It is argued that there is a “…case for employing the Statecraft approach to assess political leadership in Britain”, and, furthermore, useful in the comparative study of “foreign case studies” where, “…although different political leaders inhabit a wider variety of institutional environments, ultimately they will all still be concerned with winning votes” (24-25). It is an elitist theory based on the writings of Jim Bulpitt (1986; 1995) concerning his intrigue into the ‘exceptional nature’ of Thatcherism. It is argued to have epistemological and ontological roots in critical realism as well as being broadly interpreted as a form of historical institutionalism (James 2011a). Concerning its utility for assessing political leadership, it can be seen as encompassing two directions; first, it incorporates the element of ‘collective leadership’, whereby, “analytical primacy in the model is given to the ‘Court’…defined as…The Formal Chief Executive plus his/her political friends and advisors”. Such a richer, broader understanding arguably, “provides a more realistic interpretation of political leadership in Britain than those studies that focus just on the Prime Minister” (Buller and James 2011: 1). Second, it is attentive to ‘context’ or structure where, “the autonomy of all leaders will be limited by the need to gain and retain power over time” (Buller and James 2011: 5). Unifying these two points, Statecraft is defined as “the art of winning elections and achieving a semblance of governing competence in office” (Bullpit 1986b: 21). Specifically, Buller and James (2011: 5) believe that Bullpit, “gave priority to researching how politician’s confronted, resolved (or at least managed) a range of governing problems so that their electoral fortunes are positively promoted, or at least not adversely affected” (Bullpit 1995: 520). Assessing political leadership, therefore, is a measure on the ability of leaders to gain and retain power (Buller and James 2011: 17).³

³ Buller and James (2012) add that Statecraft is concerned with the ‘pragmatics of winning’, and does not seek to assess leaders on an ethical/moral basis, thus distinguishing assessments of political leadership in both a separate ethical and pragmatic sphere. This is in response to the criticism that Statecraft paints a cynical view of politician’s, whereas it merely seeks to assess one area of political leaders.
Building upon the need for greater clarity in assessing leaders, the Statecraft offers a fully operationalized model to elucidate the exact scope of meaning of winning elections and maintaining governing competence. Specifically, leaders are assessed, “in terms of the extent to which they achieve key Statecraft tasks necessary for successful Statecraft” (Buller and James 2012: 4). Consequently, Buller and James (2008; 2011) offer 5 substantive criteria of assessment, not represented in any hierarchical order, in addition to another support mechanism of Natural Rate of Governability (NGR), which seeks to understand leadership in context. All the criteria converge, nonetheless, on the principle that the leadership clique will aim to win elections and maintain an aura of governing competence. First, ‘Winning Electoral Strategy’ concerns the need to gain and retain power; “at [a] minimum, leaders will need a winning electoral strategy” (Buller and James 2012: 20). Given the political environment of an undecided electorate composed of various opinions and politicians of all stripes vying for their votes, the leadership clique, “will attempt to craft an image and policy package that will help the party achieve crucial political impetus in the lead up to the polls” (Buller and James 2011: 6). Following on from this, whilst winning the election is crucial enough, satisfying the aim of retaining that power requires attention to governing well. Indeed, “Leaders (and parties) will be judged on their record over the whole electoral cycle… [they need] to cultivate a reputation for ‘governing competence’ (Buller and James 2011: 7-8). Electorate reception is influenced both by policy choice and implementation. Third, there is recourse to the wider political sphere, or ‘Party Management’, “concerns the leadership’s association with the rest of the party” (Buller and James 2011: 9). It has been suggested that this criterion, above all, reflects the ‘collective leadership’ or ‘party politics’ that is often associated with the British parliamentarian political system, therefore representing the clearest shift of analysis from American literature and influence on French presidential literature. Next, ‘Political Argument Hegemony’ (PAH), in less grand terminology, translates to “Winning the battle of ideas” (Buller and James 2011: 9), so that a “party’s argument becomes generally accepted, or because the solutions to a particularly important problem seem even more plausible than its opponents” (Bulpitt 1986b: 21). Lastly, ‘Bending the Rules of the Game’, recognises the actor’s ability (i.e. the court) to manipulate and even change part of the structure, that is, the political system, in their favour. Indeed, “Statecraft will be made easier or more difficult by the existing constitutional rules of the game” (Buller and James 2012: 13).
Further to this, “any leadership clique or political elite will be constrained by, but enjoy relative autonomy from, the structural context that surrounds them”. It may be that a leader regarded as ‘poor’ may have simply been caught in an unachievable political storm where, conversely, a ‘successful’ leader may have simply ridden the waves of a favourable climate (Buller and James 2012: 5). There is thus a degree to which the structure plays a role in defining the success or failure of a leadership, thus it is necessary to “provide a framework for understanding the context in which leaders govern” (2012: 1). Whilst, “many existing approaches do not have a practical-analytical conceptual vocabulary to do this” (2012: 1), Statecraft offers the framework of ‘natural rate of governability’ (NRG). Once the effect of the ‘political climate’ has been measured, one can then re-evaluate any previous analysis to “compensate leaders who had to govern in more difficult times- conditions in which successful Statecraft was likely to be more difficult to achieve” (Buller and James 2012: 6).

Two important notes; first, all the criteria are assumed to be equal, and second, it may be necessary to add further criteria in light of new research. In essence, Buller and James admit that their ‘structural adjustment’ remains provisional, where, “By applying the approach to further Courts, further research can be used to identify any missing components of the NRG” (2012: 33). Modifications to its five substantive criteria may also be necessary with new case studies.

**4/Re-Evaluating Sarkozy**

Whilst the Statecraft approach has been primarily developed for assessing British political leaders (see Buller and James 2011; 2012), it nonetheless offers certain benchmarks that can offer useful comparative scholarship between other countries and leaders facing potentially very different political environments. Having detailed the aims and functions of the Statecraft approach to analysing political leadership, this article will now proceed to assess the tenure of former French president Nicolas Sarkozy (2007- 2012) utilising each of the components of Statecraft, followed by a further summary of their NGR ‘context’. In understanding and assessing Sarkozy, the emphasis is not so much on Sarkozy’s individual character as it is on the broader governing ensemble and their efforts to stay in power.

**Winning Electoral Strategy**

The Sarkozy court, in developing a WES, has often been interpreted as a story of highs to lows, whereby a successful start in 2007 eventually declined and was finally reduced to
defeat in 2012. To begin, the Court’s performance during the first presidential election in 2007 displayed much promise. Fourquet (2009: 2) notes that Sarkozy’s campaign of a return of authority, the revaluation of work and the reinforcing of national identity “strongly seduced the East”, not only the ‘traditional’ heartland of the right (Dippe/Avignon/Perpignan), but also areas that were sympathisers of the left (further west of the East/West Conservative/Liberal divide). Indeed, Sarkozy recognised the importance of elections and was obsessed with winning. Sarkozy’s ‘commando team’, set up since 1999, was tasked as the strategic wing of developing a winning message, “analysing opinion polls...developing slogans, arranging press releases, and generally attempting to mediate the character of Sarkozy himself, anticipating and even creating public opinion, and taming their candidate into the ‘representative’ of public opinion” (Gaffney 2012: 198). This was integral to Sarkozy’s famous charm with the media, later remarking, “That’s how an image is made” (in Gaffney 2012: 201). Commentators commended his ‘enthusiasm’, ‘energy’ and also his ‘strength’; he looked like he could be the next president (Ridet 2007). Overall, it was devoid of gaffes, speeches were targeted at particular audiences for maximum effect, and the Sarkozy and UMP message was able, “to go beyond…[the] right-wing image and some of the connotations of attacker, more of a softer side, and encroaching upon Royal’s (and Bayrou’s) discursive and symbolic territory” (Gaffney 2012: 199).

Conversely, as Figure 4.1 illustrates, Sarkozy’s popularity soon declined, primarily in response to his economic policies felt hard in certain key electoral constituencies; in particular, his hold on the North East and South East, traditional supporters of the FN who had voted for Sarkozy in 2007 who soon found, “their political leanings changing quickly” (Fourquet 2009: 5). Crucial was the difference the electorate found in Sarkozy as president and Sarkozy as the 2007 candidate, whereby, “This electorate of the North-East...who were sensitive to the will and energy of the candidate Sarkozy...can no longer tolerate the conditions of daily life that are gradually changing in the regions where de-industrialisation and unemployment have hit hard” (Fourquet 2009: 4). Supporters in these ‘sensitive’ electoral areas soon re-found their old left-wing and extreme right-wing values more appealing than ‘Sarkozysme’. The infamous ‘president des riches’ became emblematic of the Sarkozy period, and was both accentuated by himself and his party. ‘Le bouclier fiscal’ (tax shield) was perhaps the most damaging to his electoral chances (linked to a poor image of governing competence), accentuated by the Court’s decision to continue to defend its implementation, whereby PM Francois Fillon argued that the tax-shield was necessary for
‘fiscal stability’ (in Lachèvè 2012). Moreover, the individual characters that made up the Sarkozy elite were also seen to feed into this image; Kosciuisko-Morizet, la porte-parole of the UMP, did not know the price of ticket for the Paris Metro, whilst the First Lady Carla Bruni claimed herself and her husband were ‘des gens modestes’ (modest people). Further to this, in 2012, the “droitinisation” of the centre-right whereby the Sarkozy Court adopted a more right-wing agenda focusing mainly on security and controlling immigration and ‘La France Forte’ saw widespread alienation of many of these voters still. As Chrisafis (2012) commented, instead of “selling himself as Super Sarko, an international fire-fighter and problem-solver, protecting France…he chose to pour his energies into veering hard-right in a crusade against immigration and halal meat, blaming Islam for the troubles in French society”. Additionally, reiterating Buller and James (2012: 18) that, “Good campaigns should be free of public gaffes”, Sarkozy and the wider Court were noted for being liable to err. The infamous “Casse-toi, pauvr‘con” incident which involved Sarkozy denouncing a local farmer was one that would replay and also reflect his image throughout (Gaffney 2012: 200). Meanwhile, Sarkozy’s campaign was further tarnished by scandals, most notably the Battenburg affair, which also implicated senior UMP minister Eric Wœrth, where it was alleged that Sarkozy had received two payments of 50,000 euros from the heiress of L’Oreal, who it was later stated had reclaimed up to half a million from Sarkozy’s ‘tax shield’ policy.

Adapted from Sopra Group and Le Figaro (2012) ‘Barometre Politique’, 955 Respondents, Margin of Error: 3%

Fig.4.1. Have you an overall positive or overall negative opinion of Nicolas Sarkozy?
To assess fairly, however, it is necessary to understand how the Sarkozy court were hindered by a relatively poor NRG. Crucially, Sarkozy’s image as ‘president des riches’, whilst inherited through his own policies, was unfortunately drastically accentuated by the economic turmoil that still gripped France during the elections and exploited by his opponents. Further to this was the media turncoat, with key former allies Le Figaro routinely publishing updates on any scandals (Lacheve 2012). Additionally, Sarkozy was unfortunately caught between an increasingly unified left (with Hollande) and also a resurgent FN under the popular Le Pen, both of which threatened Sarkozy’s support base that he had acquired in 2007. This contrasts with an earlier, favourable NRG during the 2007 campaign, where Sarkozy’s landslide victory was accentuated by a weakened opposition where supposedly party leaders’ “secret purpose was to make sure that [Royal] lost the election” (Gaffney 2012: xxi). In 2012, Sarkozy was initially supported by a factitious opposition, marred by the SDK affair which severely divided and tarnished the reputation of the Parti Socialiste and Hollande struggling to consolidate his position. Notably, too, Sarkozy benefits from a favourable electoral system and two-round voting method. Sauger (2007) demonstrated how Sarkozy benefited from a system that both minimised the FN’s rise and was able to draw on a wider right-wing support base. Conversely, under a hypothetical STV vote under the Condorcet method, an alternative analysis showed Sarkozy losing to Bayrou in the final round (Faraque et al 2009).

**Governing Competence**

Sarkozy’s failure to repeat his electoral success was undoubtedly linked to his mixed success in his attempts to create an aura of governing competence coinciding with a poor electoral strategy. Certain policies in education (universities and the national curriculum) and relations with the EU were deemed favourable by the electorate (see Table 4.1). Indeed, Sarkozy began on a high, where popularity reached 59% of the voters having confidence in Sarkozy to govern well (see Fig. 4.2). However, his enthusiastic entrance was soon marred by the Court’s stringent hard-line economic approach and ‘droitinsation’ in areas such as immigration. No doubt the most influential of policy disasters for the court was the introduction, and moreover the maintenance of, the extremely unpopular ‘bouclier fiscal’. Attracting large-scale protest, some 29% were for the policy with 58% against, including 30% who were ‘very much’ against, whilst only 11% were ‘strongly in favour’ (Table 4.1).
Table 4.1. Sarkozy’s Record in Office- For each of the following reforms, do you approve or disapprove of the action of Sarkozy and the Government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reform</th>
<th>Fully Approve</th>
<th>Approve Somewhat</th>
<th>Disapprove Somewhat</th>
<th>Completely Disapprove</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>«Creation of the ‘statut d'auto-entrepreneur’»</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«‘Minimum Service’ Across all Transport Sectors»</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«The RSA»</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«Roundtable Debate on Environmental Policy»</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«The Difiscalisation of Overtime Work»</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«The Autonomy of Universities»</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>«Dilution of the National Curriculum»</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«Pension Reform»</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«The Debate on National Identity»</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>«The Tax- Shield (Le bouclier fiscal)»</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, Sarkozy suffered from increasing volumes of bad news that filtered through an ever more unforgiving press; the loss of France’s ‘AAA’ economic status was seen as a personal blow to Sarkozy, which coincided with the lowest confidence ratings with just 33% of the public believing he could govern the country well (Figure 4.2). Further to this (with links to the WES) was the increasing ‘droitinisation’ led by the Court, culminating in 2012 but with earlier origins; many were critical about the debate on French national identity which Sarkozy offered in 2007, with 50% against and only 36% for (Table 4.1), whilst tighter border controls and the ‘hardening’ of conditions for entry into France were largely ignored.

Despite these unpopular policies, understanding the Court’s failure needs to appreciate the complex NRG that accompanied it. As Gaffney notes, the main problem with Sarkozy is that he was a “can-do” president in a “cannot-do” age of austerity. Caught in the midst of the economic recession which “has claimed the leadership of no less than 11 European leaders in the past two years” (Lustig 2012), Fourquet (2009) comments that as early as 2008 Sarkozy was facing unpopular choices, where his shrinking support base was acutely linked to the increasing unemployment in industrial areas. Thus, in one sense he shared a similar fate to his political peers, such as Gordon Brown in the UK where “Brown’s competence ratings fell away again as more bad news on the economy continued to trickle in” (Buller and James 2012: 23). Foucault and Nadeau (2012) suggest there is a link between low confidence ratings, rising unemployment and slow economic growth in France, all of which led to their correct prediction of a Sarkozy defeat in 2012. They correctly predicted his defeat, whereby their estimate that for every 1% increase in the unemployment rate meant a decrease in the voter share of 2.6% proved significant. Notably, Sarkozy’s voter share drop in the last quarter before the election coincided with the publication of a pre-year election unemployment rate increase of 1%. As besets a leader who governs for only a short period of time, it may still be seen that Sarkozy’s policies benefited France in the long-term, if not to the short-term consent of the electorate.

Party Management
Despite reservation over the analytical value in ‘party management’ elsewhere outside of Britain (see Buller and James 2012), there is a basis for arguing that certain key figures played key roles in the Sarkozy presidency. For example, Cole (2012: 316) notes, “the Elysée Staff performed a far more public role under President Sarkozy than his predecessors. The Elysée staff were encouraged to become public figures, including giving media interviews
and publishing position papers in the press”, and, moreover, certain ministers and special advisors were in the ‘public limelight’. Concerning party relations, Sarkozy and the Court can be considered as having been rather successful. Sarkozy’s political fallout in the late 1990’s only made his triumphant return by 2005 even more impressive, defeating his principal rivals who supported the then UMP Prime Minister Dominique Villepin, who was smeared in the ‘Clearstream Affair’, was enough to see Sarkozy elected as party leader and establish key allies (Burke 2009). During his presidency, key omnipresent figures offered their loyalties, but crucial was his relationship between himself and his Prime Minister François Fillon, of which, under semi-presidentialism, a French president may need to wield certain power. For the most part, Fillon was loyal to the president and his agenda. Indeed, Favier (2012) comments how Fillon was a noted ‘collaborateur’ of Sarkozy, defending many controversial policies, most importantly the ‘bouclier fiscal’ and arguing as late as 2011 that the ‘bouclier fiscal’ had been necessary. Of further importance to the Sarkozy period were the “highly visible” ministers of whom, “the media and the public took an enormous interest” (Gaffney 2012: xiv). Notable “Sarkozyistes” included; Guéant, a political heavyweight and close advisor to Sarkozy; Alain Juppé, Mayor of Bordeaux and Foreign Minister; Nathalie Kosciuko-Marzet, Minister and Campaign Spokesperson for Sarkozy in 2012; Érik Wœrth, Minister and close Sarkozy ally; and Christine Legarde, Minister of Finance and later director of the IMF. Whilst the various ministers each played their own role in policy formation and implementation, their power was limited to often fewer and shorter cabinet meetings. Nonetheless, prominent examples of ministerial influence include Wœrth in the setting up and implementation of the pensions reform (see above), and the eventual suppression of the ‘bouclier fiscal’ in 2011, where Fillon, Guéant and Legarde were instrumental in the decision to repeal it.

At times, however, dissent emerged. PM Fillon was critical of certain aspects of the Sarkozy presidency, admitting in 2012 that he had “got some big things wrong”, and by 2010 showed some reserve at defending the ‘bouclier fiscal’. As Cole (2012: 317) argues, “With time, Fillon became less self-effacing, the Prime Minister notably challenging the right of the Elysée Chief of Staff Guéant to speak in the name of the government, and robustly rejecting the President’s description of him as a collaborateur”. Greater threats arose in the 2012 elections, which increasingly showed a factitious party leadership. One example concerned Guéant and Copé, both at the forefront of ‘courting the far-right’ (Sarkozy’s strategy that had worked in 2007), and their handling of immigration policy. Public tolerance soon dispersed
against what Jouanne (2012) disappointedly calls the ‘droitinisation’ ‘of the UMP, where she stated that such views were not “the views of the UMP...but the views of certain members”. In addition, on several notable occasions the UMP threatened to split over certain policies. The archetypical example of the Sarkozy period was the 2011 debate over renewing the ‘bouclier fiscal’, by which time the left had attracted the sympathy of a growing number of centre-right UMP members who threatened to rebel against the vote. 13 ministers and 79 members threatened rebellion, arguably contributing to the decision to scrap the policy that Sarkozy once before shouted to ministers, “No touching the tax- shield!” (Waintraub 2012).

Despite the general ease of success, however, the NRG can be deemed as extremely favourable for Sarkozy, thus success must be measured on the luck designated to him by the office. Most important was the diminished position of the role of his Prime Minister, having avoided a period of ‘cohabitation’ like his predecessor (Favier 2012). Moreover, there were no serious attempts at undermining Sarkozy amongst cabinet ministers, in part due to his own party mastery, in part due to luck. Ultimately, it remained for former rival Chirac to reluctantly support the new president, “Well, I have no choice, do I?” (in Le Monde 2012).

**Political Argument Hegemony**

According to Bullpit, PAH engenders “achieving an easy predominance in the elite debate regarding political problems, policies and the general stance of government” (1986:21). ‘Sarkozyism’ (Gaffney 2012; Cole 2012) was concerned with a break from the Gaullist era and set out for a transformation of the UMP and an attempt to ‘modernise’ France. Sarkozy’s ‘narrative’ was “A France that wakes up early” and “works harder to earn more” was the can-do attitude. His policies on granting autonomy to universities and on corporate responsibility for the environment were all well received (See Table 4.1). However, Sarkozy’s trajectory soon quickly unravelled against the political environment that took shape. There are two important phases to this change in Sarkozy’s vision and how he ceded the ‘battle of ideas’. First, Sarkozy simply championed a vision that no longer seemed to make much sense to the electorate once the recession had enveloped France. Against the backdrop of the ‘economic tsunami’ that began at the start of his tenure, “the radical promises of the electoral campaign-to refashion France for a globalized economy- were mutating into a range of reactionary initiatives to try and stave off the scourges of that very economy now in crises” (Gaffney 2012: x). The emblematic ‘bouclier fiscal’ and ‘president des riches’ signified the distance between Sarkozy and the French people in a middle of a recession. Its continuance meant
that, by 2012, Hollande, the key socialist rival, was able to present a policy package that exploited the weakness in Sarkozy’s vision. Hollande, who “doesn’t like the rich” (Fressoz 2012), proposed a daring 75% tax band that threatened to claim three quarters of the money earned by people with a base salary of more than 1 million euros was a political masterstroke, one that demarcated the boundaries between two competing visions. Voters swapped a “France that wakes up early” and the ‘bouclier fiscal’ for a new “social capitalism” (Fressoz 2012). More broadly, Sarkozy’s ‘stronger’ right-wing discourse on immigration and security, and linking this back to the economy in a sort of ‘blame game’ did no more than disenfranchise certain minority cultures and furthermore alienating moderate and loyal voters whilst failing to secure those whom it may have appealed to. ‘Sarkozyism’ never caught on.

Despite the analytical value of ‘vision’ one can deduce from Sarkozy, Bulpitt was sceptical of its exact importance, reflecting that PAH, “refers more to a winning rhetoric in a variety of locations, winning because either the framework of the party’s arguments becomes generally acceptable, or because its solutions to a particularly important problem seem more plausible than its opponents” (1986b: 21-22). Thus, PAH “does not require establishing a clear narrative for government…What does matter is that the party wins the argument concerning the nature of the problem, and the best solution to particular issues that are high up the agenda at any one time” (Buller and James 2012: 30). Essentially, this refers to a pragmatist style of government, relying upon consistently presenting itself as superior to its rivals, as opposed to presenting itself favourable on its own. This does not refer to consistent rivalry on all issues, but that “the party is on the right side of the arguments when it comes to the most important (valence) issues for the electorate” (Buller and James 2012: 30). Sarkozy thus benefited from his usual tactics of ‘being on the offensive’, to which Hollande suffered the same blows as Royal had in 2007, particularly with concerns to immigration and security. The important failing in Sarkozy’s campaign, however, was the key term ‘valence’ issues; whilst the Sarkozy Court was able to criticise Hollande, they failed to face up to the issue that voters were most concerned with, in particular the economy, which instead of creating new, innovative policies, Sarkozy was criticised for merely defending his previous record.

The NRG illustrates how the Court faced a difficult challenge trying to mould their economic rhetoric around the recession. Despite Sarkozy’s initial appeal, against the background of dire economic straits, Sarkozy and the right could simply not convince an electorate who demanded greater social security and state protection, and a ‘President Normal’ more akin to
Francois Hollande rather than a ‘President des riches’ who did no more than ‘offer the public cake’. Sarkozy became his own worst enemy; what the French had so enthusiastically voted for in 2007- can-do manifesto and an ‘extraordinary’ president- was exactly what the French later rejected in 2012 for ‘Mr Normal’.

**Bending the Rules of the Game**

For Buller and James (2012), ‘bending the rules of the game’ means that leaders “seek to change the rules of the game to make successful Statecraft more likely or defend those rules which give them a comparative advantage” (Buller and James 2012: 13; James 2012). One issue of potential constitutional reform was French expatriates allowed to vote, which Sarkozy was pushed through in a symbolic effort in 2008 (Davies 2012). However, despite Sarkozy’s attempts to capture the ‘expatriate vote’, results showed both himself and the UMP winning only 4 regions compared to the 7 gained by Hollande and the Parti Socialiste (Le Monde 2012).

Despite the criticism that Sarkozy was rather inactive regarding the constitution, one has to recognise the unfavourable NGR that Sarkozy found himself in, one that is more noticeable in France than in Britain. First, many scholars noted the decline in presidential ‘powers’ before Sarkozy entered office. In particular, a new reform in 2002 meant that the following president (next would be Sarkozy) would have a reduced term- that from 7 years to 5. This new ‘quinquennant’ (Five year term) arguably ‘compressed’ the time that a president had to implement his manifesto. Sarkozy thus had no ample time to hold a referendum on an issue that was neither pressing in the public eye, nor was the president confident in a constitutional power that had seldom been used.

**5/Conclusion**

In brief, Nicolas Sarkozy has represented a sort of enigma over the last five years- from a powerful political force in 2007 and electoral landslide, the ‘Sarko Show’ appeared to have fallen out of touch by 2012. Yet, perhaps more controversial still is how political scientists can assess whether or not his political leadership was successful. In having reviewed the past and present literature concerning political leadership, this article has sought to contribute to these ‘grey areas’ that blot the paper of this debate. Essentially, the literature is a living representation of its American origins, resulting in methodologies that reflect the American
presidential political system, that the president “makes[s] a difference” (Greenstein 2009: 6). In this vein, it remains a recurring theme to follow the popular myth of the ‘great man’ and his/her ‘character’, arguably somewhat more justified in the American presidential system vis-à-vis other political systems more akin to a more ‘collective’ style of leadership envisioned by the Statecraft model. Whilst French political leadership lies between the two archetypical extremes of the US and UK in the form of semi-presidentialism, the British Statecraft approach has been put forward to address some analytical concerns. First, it can open up a wider definition of French political leadership through recognising the role of the wider ‘Court’, and second it offers an operationalised model focusing on the Court’s pragmatic abilities in securing their place in political power, i.e. winning elections. Arguably, biographies or research into ‘presidential character’ cannot encompass or explain all the details of achieving such an important aspect of successful leadership. In adopting statecraft, Sarkozy’s success has been dependent on essentially his ability to win elections and to maintain a semblance of governing competence. The Sarkozy Court has, in summary, rather failed at this. Subject to the Court’s inability to create an image of credibility and growing disillusionment from the French public with their ‘president des riches’ in times of economic insecurity, their failure to adapt led to Sarkozy’s electoral defeat in 2012.

The Statecraft approach utilised for the purpose of assessing French political leadership, however, may pose certain analytical problems. The main analytical challenge has been to reconcile British ‘party-government’ with the semi-presidential political arrangement in the French Ve République. Unlike his British counterpart, Sarkozy theoretically assumed a much more privileged starting position to act, and has been reflected in the personal ‘Merkozy’ relationship with Germany, and his involvement with the ‘bouclier fiscal’ which arguably prolonged its life. Thus, adding the research of Cole (2012) and Gaffney (2012), we may judge Sarkozy on his failure to maximise his position and adapt his seemingly ‘out of touch’ character, and how he did not realise the expectations of the office. In analysing Sarkozy as such, it may be necessary to modify or even resist the language of Statecraft that embodies ‘collective’ leadership, and perhaps consider more ‘presidential’ form of assessments.

Nonetheless, whilst these criticisms merit attention, the Statecraft approach can build upon the study of political leadership in France. What is needed is perhaps to adapt the operationalization of the statecraft model; reiterating that at its core, statecraft is concerned with “winning elections and maintaining an semblance of governing competence”, we are
reminded of the almost universal benchmark that all politicians “are concerned with winning votes” (Buller and James 2012: 1). As an introductory research, Table 6.1 offers a slightly modified conceptual framework of the statecraft approach which will be argued is better suited to assessing the political leadership of France vis-à-vis Britain. First, concerning the criteria themselves, it is perhaps necessary to introduce a hierarchy that denotes the importance of creating a WES and maintaining an aura of Governing Competence vis-à-vis Party Management and ‘Bending the Rules of the Game’. Managing party affairs is still important in French politics, but arguably does not engender the same significance as in Britain; the directly elected and constitutionally protected French President maintains a kind of ‘romantic’ interplay with the people. Furthermore, in terms of the exact operationalization of the criteria, certain differences exist between the two political systems that merit attention. Perhaps most important is the ‘dual executive’ aspect of semi-presidentialism, and introducing a NRG that considers whether or not the president/ PM relation are hierarchical or collegial (as in cohabitation) may be crucial in re-assessing certain cases. Sarkozy himself was almost completely free from this constraint, enjoying a loyal ‘collaborateur’ at his side, thus the NRG was extremely favourable towards him in this aspect. All these considerations made, however, statecraft could become an effective means to understanding and assessing French political leaders without being undermined by a particular ‘British flavour’. Through the case study of French president Sarkozy new potential has been raised. Further research into the French presidency, as well as other comparative case studies can further elucidate the exact value of the Statecraft approach. Ultimately, Sarkozy and his Court can be labelled as having failed in achieving the most basic of a politician’s creed; winning votes.

**Table 6.1 French Statecraft- Introducing Hierarchy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statecraft Function</th>
<th>Analytical Importance of Function (France)</th>
<th>Analytical Importance of Function (Britain)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winning Electoral Strategy</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governing Competence</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Management</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Argument Hegemony</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bending the Rules of the Game</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Buller and James (2012) have suggested that certain benchmarks may be more important than others in Britain. The table used here is simply to clarify France’s position vis-à-vis Britain’s. Further research may, of course, widen and deepen its findings.*
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