

Straddling between Optimism and Mistrust: **France's Youth Doubts Reform Successes**

by Julie Hamann and Sara Jakob

For many young people in France, President Macron's reforms failed to alleviate their social anxieties. Unemployment remains high, employment conditions precarious, and what started as a protest against new fuel taxes quickly spilled over to other reform areas including social policy. Macron will need to gain the youngsters' trust ahead of the European Parliament election – not least because its outcome will decisively shape his domestic credibility, and consequently, his political fate.

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Many young people in France are facing worrying realities in their lives. Youth unemployment has remained high for decades, and conditions of employment are frequently precarious. Young people often have a wholesale lack of interest in politics, or vote for radical parties in elections. In essence, the French government is now on the right track by providing a prospect to young people with reforms intended to promote educational opportunities and improved integration into the labor market. However, its reform policy can only achieve long-term success if it couples economic growth and debt reduction with comprehensive measures to tackle social discrimination and promote equal opportunities. When he launched his poverty plan (“plan pauvreté”) in September 2018, President Emmanuel Macron tabled measures that were intended to underscore the social policy focus of his liberal program. In doing so, he also sought to shake off his persistent image of being too liberal in his reforms at a time when, according to the latest polls, only a small fraction of the population continues to support him. After successfully nipping protests in the bud during the first year of his presidency, Macron now faces a new, non-traditional social movement: The “yellow vest” protests emerged as a spontaneous turmoil against environmental taxes on fuel in late November 2018, but quickly began to target the government’s reforms in general. This makes it all the more urgent for Macron and his government to pursue more social measures with visible outcomes.

“Social Transition”, but with Limited Resources

The policy announcement comprises a wide range of support measures for children and young people, such as increasing the number of daycare places and extending integration assistance for young jobseekers. The plan as a whole seeks to reorganize social assistance benefits by combining several benefits into one, comprehensively called the basic income for employment (“revenu universel d’activité”). The new social benefit payment is to be applied automatically as soon as a monthly income fails to meet a minimum threshold, provided the beneficiary

is in or has taken up employment. Much like the other current reform efforts, the intended positive impacts of this reform on everyday life will not be immediate. Young people are particularly skeptical as to whether the reforms – which will be introduced in 2020 – will indeed improve their lives given that the social policy measures implemented so far fall short of the mark despite some important approaches. As regards the draft budget for 2019, the government was recently forced to make adjustments as the expected economic growth was not as robust as previously surmised. Since debt must be kept below the EU deficit limit, the scope for social policy measures is now even more limited than before.¹

The lack of a major protest movement so far does not reflect a broad support among the French for the measures introduced by Macron; rather, it is due to the speed at which they are being implemented. The president and Prime Minister Édouard Philippe are taking a gamble that is far from being won.

Young People Face High Level of Precariousness

For decades, young people in particular have suffered high unemployment in France. In January 2018, youth unemployment stood at 21.7 percent (and 23.2 percent in the same period of the previous year).² One particular challenge are the prolonged periods of unemployment among young low-skilled workers. In 2015, the unemployment rate in this group was approximately three times as high as among their more highly qualified peers. The proportion of those who are neither in training nor in employment is also high in France.³ Many young people, especially those in the suburbs, are unable to find work, or only have precarious, short-term contracts and little in the way of career prospects. In comparison to previous years,⁴ employees generally enjoyed a rising number of permanent contracts when taking up employment in 2017, yet younger and low-skilled workers are increasingly employed on fixed-term contracts. Factors such as social origin, migration background, and place of residence are reinforcing this effect. Therefore, precarious employment

Figure 1: Youth unemployment rate (18 to 24-year-olds) 2005-2017

Source: OECD

circumstances are not a temporary, but a structural problem. The extension of the “garantie jeunes”, a program to create jobs for young people, is a positive development with regard to the measures for young people announced in the poverty plan; furthermore, the basic income could offer these young people opportunities to achieve steady employment.⁵ However, neither of these measures – the latter of which will not be introduced until 2020 – offer a quick-fix solution for the many young people living in precarious circumstances today.

Project-Based Employment Contracts Offer No Security

As of yet, the labor law reform of September 2017 has failed to offer a solution to the precarious socio-economic situation affecting many young workers. Until its launch, project-based employment contracts – which have an indefinite duration, but automatically end with the conclusion of said project – were legally limited to a handful of industries such as construction.⁶ Among other adjustments, the reform abolished this constraint and gave companies the option to individually negotiate the issuance of indefinite contracts with trade unions, irrespective of the industry. The idea behind this was to open up the labor market to new entrants and younger employees by providing companies with the option of fixed-term employment contracts as an alternative to the still prevalent, but risk-entailing permanent contracts. The fixed-term option also includes indefinite contracts, which invariably

come to a natural end once the project is concluded, even though the exact end date of the contract is not defined.

While its intention may be good, in reality, this strategy does little to alleviate the precariousness of the young, as fixed-term and indefinite contracts cause them great difficulties in finding an apartment and achieving social security for the future. Moreover, due to this reform, employers will be even less inclined to offer permanent contracts to younger employees than before – a trend which could ultimately harm companies’ own organizational growth.⁷ That said, in certain cases, the lowered barriers in issuing fixed-term contracts, which result from the September 2017 labor law reform, might be counterbalanced by the unemployment insurance reform due to enter into force in early 2019. Under the “Law on the Freedom to Choose One’s Professional Future”, a points system is due to assess companies on how frequently they hire personnel on temporary and fixed-term contracts,⁸ although the trade unions and employers’ associations are still in the process of negotiating appropriate measures.

Reforms of Vocational Further Training to Improve Social Security

Reforms related to social security have so far been adopted within the framework of the abovementioned “Law on the Freedom to Choose One’s Professional Future”.⁹ These include improvements in the areas of vocational further training and unemployment insurance.

The individual time quota for vocational further training measures that used to be credited to the so-called “personal training accounts” for employees, students, and the unemployed will be abolished; instead, a fixed amount of money is to be transferred to these accounts for vocational further training. In addition, less qualified people will receive more funds for further training. In the medium and long term, this reform could help young people from socially deprived areas and, in particular, young, lower-skilled unemployed people to gain a stronger foothold in the labor market through further training measures.

These measures, as well as the reform to in-company training, are part of the government's “Big Investment Plan 2018-2022”, a 57 billion-euro project to support structural reforms throughout the present five-year term. These investments are to benefit the areas of education, the labor market, energy transition, and digital technology.¹⁰ In view of the current tight budget situation, existing programs and loans are set to be reallocated in order to free up the necessary funds and avoid accumulating new debt.¹¹

Unemployment Insurance Reform: Few Incentives for Start-Ups

Under the unemployment insurance reform, more people can claim benefits, as they will apply in the event of redundancy under certain conditions and, for self-employed people, if their company goes bankrupt. For financial reasons, the government did not offer unemployment insurance benefits without specific requirements – a move that runs against Macron's election campaign promises. In order to achieve savings in loss-making unemployment insurance schemes, stricter rules will apply for unemployment benefits.

In a comparative survey of February 2018 comprising several countries with 1,000 representative individuals each, 48 percent of young people in France indicated that they wished to found their own start-up.¹² While the expansion of unemployment insurance for the self-employed could, in some cases, have a positive impact on young entrepreneurs, this will hardly serve as a primary incentive.

In-Company Training Is No Panacea

Various measures are planned to make in-company training more appealing.¹³ For example, the maximum age for starting vocational training is to be raised to 30, and it will be possible to enter into training contracts through-

out the year, making training accessible to more youngsters. Employers will also be able to open training centers (Centre de formation d'apprentis, CFA) without administrative hurdles, and wherever they indicate a need for skilled workers.¹⁴ They will be able to terminate training contracts or adjust working hours for trainees more easily, and firms with fewer than 250 employees can claim subsidies for each new trainee. These measures are aimed at encouraging more companies to train young people.¹⁵

At present, however, few young people opt for this type of training. Having completed their secondary school education, only around 30 percent register for in-company training with a training contract at a company and a theoretical training at a CFA; the remaining 70 percent prefer a school-based vocational training.¹⁶ Although in-company training integrates young people into the labor market with considerably greater success,¹⁷ its reputation in France is poor, especially compared to school-based vocational training and higher education.

As a result, the announced measures represent nothing short of a cultural shift. On the one hand, companies have never played a strong administrative role in providing in-company training in France until now. Few companies train their apprentices themselves, and in the rare case they do, they have little say over the curriculum and, consequently, very limited scope to shape the necessary qualification of skilled workers. On the other hand, however, in-company vocational training and the school-based vocational training compete with each other. The current reform does not yet solve this problem, and further reforms will be necessary. To a large extent, their success will depend on how credibly in-company vocational training can change its image, and on how the interplay between in-company vocational training and school-based vocational training pans out in the future.¹⁸

Reforms Almost without Protests

In the past, major reforms ranging from labor law to social security often led to sizeable protest movements and, at times, culminated in the failure of the proposed legislation. So far, however, Macron's strategy to stave off a major protest movement – at least of the “traditional” kind under union leadership – seems to bear fruit. The implementation of so many different reforms has paralyzed the unions as they fail to mobilize an umbrella movement. Likewise, the first significant demonstration after the summer break has not been able to change the present narrative.¹⁹ In polls surveying approval rates for Macron and his government, the majority of French

people appear to have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Uncertain whether the current reforms are indeed appropriate, they are making their approval contingent on the reforms' success.

A so-called convergence of struggles (“convergence des lutes”) – combining the demands of trade unions, student movements, public sector workers and other groups – remains a distant prospect. This is also due to a number of developments in recent years. The trade unions are divided, have failed to act as a unified voice on reform projects, and young people in particular feel less and less represented by them. As in other countries, young French people today rarely get involved in trade unions and are more amenable to new, more flexible social movements such as *Nuit Debout* (“Up All Night”), which originated in 2016 and opposes proposed labor reforms.²⁰

To the dismay of many protesters, the vision of a renewed large-scale student movement exactly 50 years after the mass protests of 1968 has failed to materialize. Students at numerous universities did block sections of campuses in the belief that the new law on access to higher education would encourage selectivity among universities and thus lead to more inequality. However, they did not succeed in mobilizing a broad base – despite links to railway workers' protests and the support of the leftist movement known as *La France Insoumise* (“Unbattered France”) or *LFI*.

It is no accident that the recent “yellow vest” movement of November 2018 emerged outside of a specific organized interest group. This underlines the weaknesses of both trade unions and other institutionalized interest groups as well as the opposition's inability to take a political stand against the government's reforms.

Opposition in Parliament or on the Streets?

By means of the *LFI* movement, its founder Jean-Luc Mélenchon is not only attempting to rally together a young generation of protesters both outside and inside parliament. Notwithstanding *LFI*'s limited seats (17) in parliament, he also hopes to establish himself and the movement as a unifying voice for all left-wing parties and movements who oppose Macron and his government. Mélenchon has tried to leave an imprint of his opposition on the streets, and is seeking to transform the 2019 European Parliament elections into a referendum against Macron – complete with euroskeptic rhetoric.

Under its new Chairman Olivier Faure, the Socialist Party (PS) also criticizes the government's reform policy as one-sidedly geared toward liberalization, although

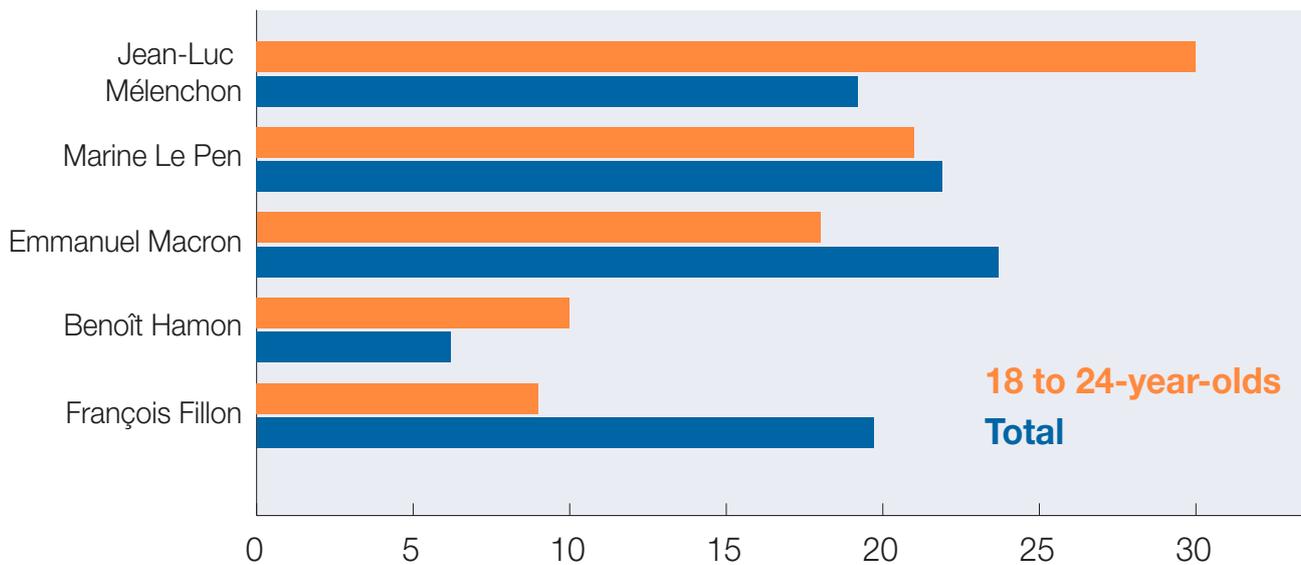
it still gives the *LFI* a wide berth. Whereas the Socialists welcome the new measures of the poverty plan in principle, they have criticized their insufficient level of funding.²¹ Even one year after the elections, internal divisions continue to weaken not only the Socialists, but also the other center-right opposition parties. In addition, with representatives of *La République En Marche* dominating the National Assembly with 308 members of parliament, the latter could not serve as a viable platform for debating the reforms. The tight schedule set by the government imposes additional time constraints on parliamentarians.²²

Vulnerable Democracy

The recent months have shown that young people are giving rise to a platform for protest and activism beyond established political structures. Although *En Marche* and Macron are brimming with youthfulness, these youngsters do not form a natural alliance with the president and the government. Those among them who do vote often opt for radical political alternatives: In the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, Jean-Luc Mélenchon polled best among 18 to 24-year-olds with 30 percent, followed by Marine Le Pen with 21 percent. Other young people are no longer interested in politics, or abstain from voting altogether. Indeed, the rate of abstention among the young is the highest throughout all age groups. Together with deliberately casting invalid votes (“votes blancs”), this move is becoming increasingly important as a political and symbolic act among the youth in particular.

As discussed above, while a large-scale youth movement has not emerged, this age group is becoming highly fragmented and radicalized among protest actors. Alongside left-wing and anti-capitalist movements, right-wing radical movements are gaining traction among the young in the shape of the identitarian movement (“*Génération identitaire*”) or the “*Action française*”.²³ These movements barely feature in the reform debate. While their actions are primarily targeted against migration and asylum policy, their increasing presence and the radicalization of young voters at the polls demonstrate a fundamental loss of confidence among young people in the whole spectrum of policies pursued to date.

Another alarming development is the steady loss of confidence in democracy in general among the young. Some 46 percent of 18- to 35-year-olds believe that other political systems are just as good as democracies, compared to 36 percent of all ages groups; in 2014, only 29 percent agreed with that assessment, compared to 24 percent in total.²⁴

Figure 2: Voter turnout among 18 to 24-year-olds, first round of French presidential election, 2017

Source: Ipsos PRÉSIDENTIELLE 2017

Rising Alternative Forms of Participation

Supporters of extreme parties share one reason for this loss of confidence in particular, namely the impression that they are not, or no longer are, represented by politics. The younger generation was particularly hit by the 2008 economic crisis, and improvement was found wanting under presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. Frustration was particularly high under Hollande: So decisive had the young people's votes been for his triumph that he had proclaimed himself "president of the young" and celebrated his election victory on the Place de la Bastille surrounded by young supporters.²⁵

For many, the change promised yet not delivered by Hollande can now only be effected "outside the system". This powerful motive also helped Macron to mobilize his movement, which had come to life as a "grass-roots movement" – an alternative to party politics even though it was led by such politicians. Despite their often fundamentally different ideological focuses, these various movements harness one and the same element. Young people are particularly eager to engage in political activism, and alternative forms of political participation often emerge at local level, for instance, in associations. However, if the young categorically refuse to participate in the political decision-making process, they will – perhaps fatefully – deprive society of a great deal of democratic potential.

Outlook

The reforms in the education sector, efforts to strengthen in-company vocational training, and the reforms to the

labor market and unemployment insurance are of great social importance. They could help overcome social divisions, safeguard opportunities for participation in society, and strengthen citizens' political involvement in the long term. In the summer of 2018, Macron's faithful companions criticized him for lacking focus in combating inequality.²⁶ Macron's concept "at the same time" ("en même temps"), which he had stressed during his presidential campaign, had implied the "simultaneous" launch of economic reforms to support more robust growth and achieve greater employment, and of social security measures for employees and the socially disadvantaged. By these standards, the political measures taken so far appear to be too strongly geared toward market liberalization, and the current approach rather resembles an "everything at once" aimed at keeping protest levels as low as possible. However, it does not take much to spark protest: The "yellow vests" demonstrate how quickly a protest movement can gather momentum once discontent with a set of measures spreads across various social groups. Opposition leaders or unions no longer need to act as platforms to coordinate such movements, as social media can fulfill this purpose on a much larger scale.

As far as the younger generation is concerned, this means two things. On the one hand, the circumstances of younger people must improve noticeably and in the longer term in order to avoid cementing inequality, social division, and a rejection of politics. In particular, the government must invest in education, vocational training, and employment to provide young people with prospects and opportunities to participate in society. On the other hand, political structures must open up to better accom-

modate and integrate the wide-ranging involvement of young people. Young people must not be treated solely as vehicles and communication tools, but must be taken seriously in their will to encourage and effect tangible change themselves.

During the first year of his presidency, Macron and his government did not manage to win the trust of most young people. From their perspective, he has failed to implement the social part of his program effectively, both in word and deed. The president is being criticized as being out of touch with the people, and this judgement keeps flaring up whenever he makes new spontaneous pronouncements (known as “petites phrases”) that make him appear brisk and imperious.²⁷ In face of this criticism, he will not easily shed his image as the “president of the rich” just yet. For Macron, a great deal will depend on whether young people in particular will be convinced by the “social turnaround” initiated this autumn, and not

much time is left to build trust. For the French president, the 2019 European Parliament election are now an important hurdle in two respects. He must convince voters that his project is worth their vote. To that end, his policies would need to change their everyday life for the better, and they would need to do so soon. At the same time, Macron will have to succeed in the European Parliament election in order to be able to implement his plans at the European level – a move which, again, would enforce his credibility in his own country.

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Notes:

- 1 “Budget 2019. Croissance revue à la baisse, prestations sociales touchées : Edouard Philippe annonce ces mesures,” Ouest France, August 26, 2018, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/edouard-philippe/croissance-revue-la-baisse-prestations-sociales-touchees-edouard-philippe-annonce-ses-mesures-pour-5936799> (accessed October 2, 2018).
- 2 Eurostat, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8701423/3-01032018-AP-FR/29313f00-7077-4e90-a919-9ea750b7845f> (accessed June 7, 2018).
- 3 According to OECD surveys for 2016, the share of NEET (youth not in employment, education, or training) among male young people in France aged 20-24 was 22.3 percent; among young women of the same age group it was 21.6 percent, <https://data.oecd.org/youthinac/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.htm> (accessed June 7, 2018).
- 4 Antoine Krempf, “Aujourd’hui, 85% des contrats de travail sont des CDI”, franceinfo, January 12, 2016, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-vrai-du-faux/aujourd-hui-85-des-contrats-de-travail-sont-des-cdi_1773627.html (accessed June 13, 2018).
- 5 Mathilde Goanec and Faïza Zerouala, “Plan pauvreté: pour être aidé, il faudra travailler,” Mediapart, September 13, 2018, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/130918/plan-pauvrete-pour-etre-aide-il-faudra-travailler?onglet=full> (accessed October 2, 2018).
- 6 Anna Imhof, Bastian Sattelberger, Philippe Gillig, cep Adhoc, Französische Arbeitsmarktreform – Inhalte und Bewertung, September 20, 2017, p. 4 and p. 14, https://www.cep.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/cep.eu/Studien/cepAdhoc_Franzoesische_Arbeitsmarktreform/cepAdhoc_Franzoesische_Arbeitsmarktreform.pdf (accessed November 5, 2018).
- 7 Virginie Mora, “Innover consisterait à recruter des jeunes en CDI,” Le Monde économie, December 6, 2017.
- 8 “Les principales mesures prévues par la loi « avenir professionnel »,” Le Monde, June 20, 2018, and “Le projet de loi « avenir professionnel » définitivement adopté par le Parlement,” Le Monde, August 1, 2018. The points system remains a contentious issue. The employers’ associations are not in favor of introducing it across the board, but want instead to address the issue within the framework of industry agreements, cf. Raphaëlle Besse Desmoulières, “Réforme de l’assurance-chômage : les lignes rouges des partenaires sociaux,” Le Monde, August 31, 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/economie-francaise/article/2018/10/09/premiere-mobilisation-syndicale-de-la-rentree-contre-la-politique-sociale-de-macron_5366589_1656968.html](https://abonnes.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/08/31/reforme-de-l-assurance-chomage-les-lignes-rouges-des-partenaires-sociaux_5348494_823448.html) (accessed October 11, 2018).
- 9 Les principales mesures prévues, loc. cit. (annotation 8).
- 10 “The Big Investment Plan 2018-2022”, French Government, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/the-big-investment-plan-2018-2022376642> (accessed 13 November, 2018).
- 11 Clément Lesaffre, “Plan d’investissement : la stratégie du gouvernement pour trouver 57 milliards d’euros,” Europe 1, September 25, 2017, <http://www.europe1.fr/economie/plan-d-investissement-la-strategie-du-gouvernement-pour-trouver-57-milliards-deuros-3445580> (accessed June 19, 2017).
- 12 See “Infographie: Les jeunes et les start-up,” Alliancy, April 13, 2018, <https://www.alliancy.fr/etudes/start-up/2018/04/13/infographie-les-jeunes-et-les-startups> (accessed June 17, 2018). Unemployment insurance reform is unlikely to be a key incentive for this form of involvement in the world of work, however.
- 13 Céline Desserre, “Réforme de la formation professionnelle 2018: travaux préparatoires,” https://www.defi-metiers.fr/sites/default/files/users/229/reforme_synthese_dm.pdf and the French Embassy in Germany, “Reform der Berufsausbildung: Frankreich setzt verstärkt auf duale Ausbildung,” <https://de.ambafrance.org/Reform-der-Berufsausbildung-Frankreich-setzt-verstarkt-auf-duale-Ausbildung> (both accessed June 3, 2018).
- 14 “Apprentissage: les grands axes de la réforme,” Le Monde, February 9, 2018. The regions previously responsible for the CFA are still receiving support for the establishment of training centers in rural areas and in social hotspots. The amount of state funding for the CFA depends on the number of trainees.
- 15 Mathilde Goanec, “Apprentissage: « C’est le monde réel, nous y sommes plongés sans filet »,” Mediapart, June 10, 2018, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/100618/apprentissage-c-est-le-monde-reel-nous-y-sommes-plonges-sans-filet?onglet=full> (accessed June 15, 2018).
- 16 Anna Imhof, “Die französische Berufsausbildung. Sieben Reformvorschläge,” cepInput 02/2018, p. 7, https://www.cep.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/cep.eu/Studien/cepInput_Franzoesische_Berufsausbildungsreform/cepInput_Franz__Berufsausbildungsreform.pdf (accessed June 17, 2018).
- 17 Cf. 2018, “Apprentissage: les grands axes ...,” loc. cit. (annotation 14).
- 18 Cf. ibid. section “Changer l’image et l’orientation” at the end of the report.
- 19 Cf. “Quelque 21 500 manifestants à Paris contre la politique de Macron,” Le Monde, October 9, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie-francaise/article/2018/10/09/premiere-mobilisation-syndicale-de-la-rentree-contre-la-politique-sociale-de-macron_5366589_1656968.html (accessed October 11, 2018).
- 20 Although protests against the law Loi El Khomri (the first part of a program of labor law liberalization and social dialogue continued under Macron) were the catalyst for the anti-capitalist movement, other, more general political and economic developments soon came to the fore. Instead of traditional demonstrations, the protest consisted of months of daily rallies complete with their own organizational structures. Cf. Julie Hamann, “Frankreichs bewegter Frühling: Protest, Streik, Aufbegehren,” <https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/28252> (accessed June 14, 2018).
- 21 “Réactions du Parti socialiste au « plan pauvreté » du gouvernement,” Parti socialiste, <https://www.parti-socialiste.fr/reaction-du-parti-socialiste-au-plan-pauvrete-du-gouvernement/> (accessed October 10, 2018).
- 22 Cf. Lénéig Bredoux, “Les députés soumis à un rythme effréné,” Mediapart, June 7, 2018, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/070618/les-deputes-soumis-un-rythme-effrene> (accessed June 20, 2018).
- 23 Cf. “Ces ultras qui défient Macron,” L’Obs, May 17, 2018, pp. 26-28.
- 24 “Fractures Françaises 2018,” Ipsos/Sopra Steria, https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2018/0709/fractures_francaises_2018.pdf (accessed July 11, 2018).
- 25 Cf. Anne Muxel, “Le soutien déterminant des jeunes à François Hollande,” Le figaro.fr, May 7, 2012, <http://elections.lefigaro.fr/presidentielle-2012/2012/05/07/01039-20120507ART-FIG00693-le-soutien-determinant-des-jeunes-a-francois-hollande.php> (accessed June 20, 2018).
- 26 Cf. Open letter by three economists involved in Macron’s election program calling on him to adopt a clearer stance with respect to social policy: Philippe Aghion, Philippe Martin, and Jean Pisani-Ferry, “L’ambition émancipatrice du programme présidentiel échappe à un nombre grandissant de concitoyens,” Le Monde, June 9, 2018.
- 27 François Geffrier, edited by Grégoire Duhourcau, “Echange entre Macron et un chômeur : “C’est du mépris et c’est indigne d’un président de la République”, Europe 1, September 16/17, 2018, <http://www.europe1.fr/politique/echange-entre-macron-et-un-chomeur-cest-du-mepris-et-cest-indigne-dun-president-de-la-republique-3757013> (accessed September 11, 2018).

