

The Politics of Symbols: Reflections on the French Government's Framing of the 2015 Terrorist Attacks

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In January and again in November 2015 France was confronted with a series of co-ordinated terrorist attacks in Paris. These 'events' shocked France (and the world) and were presented by actors and observers as turning points. Yet, as all significant events, they give rise to a plurality of interpretations. We argue that the strategy developed by the French government is a good example of how contemporary politics mobilises the symbolic, a dimension of public policy that is often neglected. Using interviews with key advisors of the President and the Prime Minister and analyses of official speeches and performances in the first weeks after the attacks, we show how the government endeavoured to impose its framing of the attacks through rhetoric, symbols and performance in order to coproduce the 'events' as moments in which it acted decisively to unite the Nation.

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In January and again in November 2015 France was confronted with a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris. The first occurred at the headquarters of a satirical newspaper (*Charlie Hebdo*) and in a kosher supermarket; the second in a stadium, on the terraces of cafés and restaurants in the heart of the city and in a concert hall (*Le Bataclan*). They left, respectively, 17 and 130 people dead and, in the case of November, hundreds of wounded. The initial violence and the subsequent hunts for the perpetrators were carried on under intense media scrutiny and France plunged into a state of shock. They mobilised millions of people in the streets (culminating in the 11 January marches) and online (for instance, through the slogan '*Je suis Charlie*' that spread through the world in the hours

following the first attack). The nature, the extent and the social significance of such mobilisations has been intensely discussed (Courtois *et al.*, 2015; Fourquet and Mergier, 2015; Todd and Laforgue, 2015; Valls, 2015; Mayer and Tiberj, 2016). The attacks and reactions to them received exceptional media coverage at the time¹ and led to intense editorial activities in the months that followed: an impressive array of think tank analyses, books, documentaries and even graphic novels have been published since January 2015. Twitter proclaimed them its ‘events of the year’ in 2015.² Opinion polls revealed a surge of support for the executive’s effort to unite the country and respond to the attacks. Yet, no study has thus far focussed on this effort and how it was conceived and built by the French government.

At the time the two series of events were met with quite different interpretations of national unity. This is in no way surprising (Nora, 1974; Farge, 2002; Berezin, 2012), particularly if one takes into account the brutality with which they punctured the taken-for-granted nature of peaceful context. They created a ‘critical juncture’ (Mahoney, 2001, p. 114; Pierson, 2004, p. 135) or a comprehensibility break, defining a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ (Bensa and Fassin, 2002, p. 9). Yet, the complexity of an event might lead us to underestimate the role some actors play in defining it as a turning point. In times of crisis, governments are expected to provide some guidance as to how reality *ought* to be understood. Their role in the production of such meanings is all the more important as the everyday consensus on what it means to live together—that is normally maintained through routine interactions—is suspended or challenged. Indeed, at such times, governments offer one of the first interpretations of what is happening and do so in part because they are seen as one of the few sources of reliable information (Baum and Groeling, 2010). Their readings of the situation are expressed through speech acts and practical decisions: these interpretations contribute to shape others’ understandings and reactions.

We contend that these events offer excellent opportunities to analyse how a small group of key-actors, at the head of the French State, has contributed to shape the interpretation of the terrorist attacks. Through rhetoric and symbolic performance, the executive (President Hollande, Prime Minister Valls, Minister of the Interior Cazeneuve) played an active role in building what can be seen as a rally phenomenon combining public opinion support and the (always relative) suspension of criticism from the media and the Opposition. The objective of this

¹ They registered at the highest levels of ‘media noise’, accessed at <http://www.siglab.fr/fr/lannee-media-tique-edition-2016> on 24 April 2017. See also Lefebure and Sécail (2016).

² Twitter France counted the number of keywords and ‘retweets’ they contributed to generate (<http://www.europe1.fr/medias-tele/les-attentats-evenements-de-lannee-2015-sur-twitter-france-2632253>, accessed 21 March 2016).

article is to analyse the efforts deployed by the French government to control the definition of the situation (in a context in which they manifestly had lost such control), in interaction with the media, with political elites and with what they perceived of the public's reactions. We focus on the government's communication strategy and performance during the first couple of weeks after the attacks and analyse the events of January and November together because they offer interesting contrasts and similarities. These attacks were not the only terrorist incidents in France during that period but both were identified as acute crises both because of the sheer number and the particular qualities of the victims (Chowanietz, 2016, p. 162).

We start this article with a review of the literatures on the rallying of peoples around the flag, crises management and frame analysis, in order to situate our argument. Then, after the presentation of our data sources and methodology, we show that the government aimed to assert its control over the situation as well as the impression that it was in control through performances and the manipulation of symbols. We then turn to the rhetorical framings 'deployed' and argue that these interpretations were tightly articulated with justifications for the chosen courses of action and a concern for social and political unity. In the last two sections, we analyse how the French government worked to produce a 'rally around the flag' through its engagement with the Opposition, the media and public opinion, arguing that this was achieved more successfully in January than in November. In the conclusion, we return to the symbolic dimension of policy in times of crisis.

1. Literature review

It is sometimes taken for granted that terrorist attacks strengthen the popularity of the government. As a consequence, a variety of responses are sometimes seen to constitute a tendency for a 'rallying around the flag' prompted by the promotion of a 'patriotic reflex' (Mueller, 1985). This has given rise to a huge literature. Collins, for instance, analyses how, in the aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001 (thereafter 9/11), the displaying of the flag could be read as a ritual of solidarity and gave rise to shifts in social identification and social pressure (Collins, 2004); Brody on the other hand distinguishes elite and public opinion, and the media. He argues that they influence each other and that, in the absence of alternative sources of information from the government, support for the executive was easier to achieve (Brody, 1991). Hetherington and Nelson analyse swings in public support for the executive and proposed that the suspension of criticism from the opposition could come from them taking cues from their interpretation of the public mood (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003). Baker and Oneal highlight the role of the President's handling of the situation (Baker and

Oneal, 2001) and his ability to use his position to direct media attention and therefore provide cues to the public. Chowanietz offers a rare comparative study of rallying effects, with a particular (but not exclusive) focus on the reactions of parliamentary opposition (Chowanietz, 2016). In January 2015 for instance, the popularity of both the President and his Prime Minister (PM) received a considerable boost—if temporary and probably all the stronger as the initial level was low.³ The government also obtained the support of parliamentary parties (including radical parties, particularly in January) and religious leaders. Support for the government was also impressive after the second attack, in November, although the repetition opened a particular vulnerability for the government and questions were asked about how effective its response had been.

Indeed, overall, the literature shows that rallying around the flag—or broad support for the executive, is by no means guaranteed. Mueller (1985), for instance, has shown that only ‘specific, dramatic and sharply focused international events’ are likely to have an impact on the popularity of the American President. Moreover, he did not distinguish the different groups that might rally behind the executive. The more recent literature points to a number of factors that contribute (or not) to the rallying of the Opposition parties around the incumbent government: the magnitude of the attack (i.e. the number of victims) and the origin of the attack (domestic or international); the nature of the target (anonymous commuters, the State, the press) and the nature of the government (Presidential or Parliamentary systems); the repetition of attacks; the political orientation of the incumbent government⁴; and the electoral calendar (Baum, 2002, 2013; Williams, Koch and Smith, 2013; Chowanietz, 2016). The comparison between January and November 2015 is a good way to illustrate such phenomenon of rallying or resistance from the Opposition parties.

This is congruent with the literature on crises management, which points to the importance of effective communication strategies throughout a given crisis. However, governments do not merely offer solutions to ‘objective’ social problems: they seize issues, construct them as problems requiring political intervention and propose what they claim to be appropriate political responses (Edelman,

³See Baker and Oneal (2001). The boost benefited the Prime Minister more than the President and was stronger after January than November. See the Cevipof panel study (wave 7 conducted in February 2016, accessed at <http://www.cevipof.com/fr/le-barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof/resultats-1/vague7/> on 24 April 2017).

⁴Right-wing governments are more likely to benefit from rally after a terrorist attack (Chowanietz, 2016, pp. 88–89). More generally, since the 1990s, the governmental left has sought to assert its credentials in terms of security (Faucher-King and Le Galès, 2010, pp. 124–130). Following Tony Blair’s example, Manuel Valls has constructed his political persona on the issue of security.

1985). The symbolic dimension of public policy is often overlooked, sometimes reduced to communication or to measures with little or no impact on the issue at stake, although most (if not all) public policies involve either using existing social categories or creating new ones, such as the definition of victims or of targets of action (Soss and Schram, 2007) or the justification for policy instruments or of a framework for policy intervention (Felstiner, Abel and Sarat, 1980; Stone, 1989; Radaelli, 2000). Governments are expected to maintain the public order and, in time of crisis, to (re)create order. They do so through the manipulation of images, symbols and rituals ('tHart, 1993, p. 36). One of the core tasks of crisis management revolves around giving meaning to what is going on. Policymakers give interpretations of the event at each stage: they describe the event, identify the victims, point to the causes, label the problem and offer solutions, which they then implement and evaluate. All these meaning-making activities are developed in relation to the expectations of the other stakeholders, such as public opinion and the media. Boin *et al.* (2011) convincingly argue that effective crisis communication makes a crucial difference between getting or losing 'the permissive consensus' (p. 70) because the 'selective exploitation of data, arguments and historical analogies' contribute to shape public representations and facilitate the formation of coalitions (p. 82). Our work speaks directly to this kind of theme.

Yet, governments are not the only social actors to engage in framing activities, that is to say in a 'process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner' (Kuypers, 2006, p. 8). Scholars of social movements who have analysed the cognitive work performed by movements (Benford and Snow, 2000) show how such movements articulate a social fact as a political issue and propose an interpretation of its causes and its potential remedies through images, stories, language and emotions. Movements attempt to influence the frames of interpretation used by the public in order to make sense of an event (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987). Indeed, research confirms that public opinion can be influenced by the ways in which a variety of social actors, movements, institutions, politicians and the media talk about an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Thus, the literature on social movements can also help us to understand the potential impact of the executive's framing of the events on the public sphere and the population. Kuypers (2006), for instance, discusses how President G.W. Bush's interpretations of 9/11 served as a justification for war and influenced the media, elite and public opinion reactions in the following weeks and months. Our aim here is to reproduce this kind of analysis concerning the French government's responses to the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

2. Data and methodology

Thus, when analysing public reactions to terrorist attacks, it is important to gauge how the government contributed to shape the public's reactions, whether it made it more difficult for the Opposition and the media to be critical, merely encouraged a 'patriotic reflex' or helped the emergence of a consensus that legitimised its handling of a crisis it had failed to prevent.

Our study draws from a series of interviews conducted in three waves in 2015, 2016 and 2017. In March 2015, we gained access to the office of the PM in Matignon where we interviewed close advisors to and senior civil servants of Manuel Valls (5). These preliminary contacts led us to secure further interviews at the Elysée Palace with several members of President Hollande's staff (3), and at Hotel Beauvau (Interior Minister's Michel Cazeneuve's office). We also interviewed members of the Paris Mayor's office (2). We attended seminars and interviewed staff at the Government Information Services (3). Finally, we interviewed several political actors involved in the organisation of the March or in the political reactions (4). We conducted a further five interviews in May and June 2016 and one in February 2017, including repeat interviews. These interviews provided precious information about decision-making processes. In 2015, we asked people to recall what they had done, what their specific role involved and how it differed from the routine of government. In 2016, in addition to these questions, they were asked about the differences between the two sequences (January and November). Triangulation of information was important because their precise memories of the chronology of events and decisions during the period were sometimes imprecise (Davies, 2001). Moreover, as each of our respondents was involved in a different role and task, they brought different perspectives on the management of the crisis and on the workings of government: some liaised with the victims and their families, some provided notes on ceremonial practices or assessed variations in the public's moods, some coordinated the flow of information during the operations of the police services, some talked to the media or coordinated the Republican march or the mini international gathering, and so forth. But they were also in relation to each other and participated in the same meetings, which enabled us to triangulate their responses.

We met all the interviewees in their offices and recorded our conversations. However, due to the sensitivity of the material and the timing of our study (interviews were conducted a few weeks after the events), we assured the President's, PM's and Interior Minister's staffs that their comments would not be directly attributed (Peabody *et al.*, 1990). Although this has helped gathering original data, it makes using direct quotes while preserving anonymity a challenge (Rhodes, 2011, pp. 8–11). President Hollande's Communication advisor, whom we met three times, is an exception to this rule. In the text, we use quotation marks

whenever we draw directly from interview material and, where possible or appropriate, we indicate whether the interviewee is speaking from the Elysée, Matignon or otherwise (Interior Ministry; Government's information services or SIG, political party).

We also collected and analysed primary sources such as the speeches and declarations made by the President, the PM and the Interior Minister; their respective official schedule; press releases from the *Conseil des ministres*, the President's, PM's and Interior Minister's offices and the National Assembly.⁵ We consulted audio-visual documents including those of public ceremonies and public performances, accessible directly through the governmental websites, through video websites and archives. We collected articles published in the daily and weekly press. We had access to a number of surveys and reports, published (or not) during this period, relating to public opinion reactions to the tragic events, to post-electoral surveys or to governmental initiatives, or to tolerance.⁶ In these documents, we searched for narratives and key words, giving special attention to the use of metaphors, symbols and symbolic practices.

We concentrate here on how the government constructed the attacks as events during the first couple of weeks.

3. Political communication as symbolic action

Framing is usually reduced to its rhetorical dimension but we argue that one should also take into account symbolic practices. In fact, public authorities claimed on a number of occasions that their actions used symbols (of national unity, of national identity or of their regalian powers, for instance) and involved symbolic work. Communication is an essential dimension of any successful governmental strategy, as anthropologists have repeatedly shown. The senior civil servants we spoke to nevertheless point to recent changes and consider that 'feeding the beast' has become more relentless and that there is a new appetite for transparency. 'Things will get known anyway' concurred the chiefs of staff we interviewed and the President's communication advisor. This context explains not only the decision of the former to communicate on failed attacks, but also the latter's choice to provide access and images to fill the media space available rather

⁵ These are available on the sites of these institutions: <http://www.elysee.fr>, <http://www.gouvernement.fr> and accessed at <http://www.interieur.gouv.fr> on 24 April 2017. We quote the speeches by providing their date, title and location.

⁶The *Service d'information du gouvernement* receives all published polls focusing on the action of the government. Dynamob was conducted in early December 2015 (accessed at <http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-dynamob/page-d-exemple/> on 24 April 2017). The CNCDDH publishes an annual report (*Commission Nationale Consultative Des Droits de l'Homme*, 2016).

than risk it being filled by political adversaries and critics. Communication was planned to underline the importance given by the government to the unfolding events.

The actions of the French President are largely constrained by protocol and routines. These contributed to give the President's words a solemn dimension that had been somehow lost during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. François Hollande initially defined himself in opposition to his predecessor's hyper activity and visibility (De Maillard, Surel, 2012; Gaffney, 2015). This changed after January 2015: the President intervened more frequently in the media through formal speeches and interviews; there were also more clips of performance of official duty or interactions with journalists and documentaries about life at Elysée Palace.

Presidential trips are usually planned a long time in advance but visits to the location of catastrophes are considered as a symbolic imperative of crisis management in a media age (Boin, *et al.* 2011, p. 85). They give a particular light to the place visited, they focus attention and they indicate the intensification of governmental efforts and the support of the President.⁷ In both cases, the President went to the scene to assess the situation, before the buildings had been secured by the Police and Security Services. Hollande met impromptu with journalists outside the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January; he also visited the Bataclan to talk to survivors and emergency services in the middle of the night in November. Each time, he expressed 'France's infinite emotion in the context of the drama and tragedy' (14 November).

In fact, every presidential decision or move is a form of institutional communication.⁸ As a consequence, whether they are planned or not, they all can be seen as meaningful (Mariot, 2007) and interpreted. Governments, after all, now have communication experts whose job is to spin or interpret for the media the message to be read. The President's communication advisor insisted: 'It was very strong, the fact that he went, it gives a national and even international dimension to the event; (...) it is also reassuring for people, because the President is physically there.' As such it can be spun as symbolically significant, while preserving the agency of the political actor performing the role: our interviewees at the Elysée and at Matignon all emphasised the 'spontaneity' of the decision.

The presidential team decided that it was important 'not to get stuck in the Elysée' and to project the image of a government in action. The President's actions and decisions were staged to underline their significance: the 'President

⁷This is not unique to France: G.W. Bush was criticised for flying over New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina rather than land and visit the victims.

⁸This is true in France as it is in the USA (Kuypers, 2006, p. 3).

decided to go to the bedside of the victims at the Hospital to bear witness and to show empathy'; he 'called the government and the Defence council to show immediately how the government was responding to protect and to seek the perpetrators'; 'he hardly slept and we made sure people knew about it'. The presidential schedule was altered: non-emergency engagements were cancelled, foreign trips postponed or organised at short notice. President Hollande was due to meet Chancellor Merkel in Strasbourg on 11 January. As the hostage situation in Vincennes was resolved (9 January 2015), the Chancellor offered to come to Paris instead (and she was followed by many other foreign representatives). In November, Hollande cancelled his participation at the G20 summit in Turkey (sending his Foreign Minister in his stead). In the following weeks, he received European PMs in Paris and also travelled to Washington DC and Moscow. Some meetings were maintained because they could be read as symbolically significant, as was the case with the New Year's reception of the religious leaders at Elysée Palace on 7 January.

An impressive number of photo opportunities were scheduled: meeting rooms were open to photographs, such as the two 'situation rooms' at the Interior Ministry or where the Defence council met at the Elysée Palace, so that the government could be seen working to solve the crisis. In print, broadcast and online media as well as on governmental websites, President Hollande could be seen welcoming visitors on the steps of the Elysée Palace (particularly on 8 and 9 January or on 15 November), sitting down with advisors and ministers, attending meetings and talking with foreign Heads of State and government (11 January; in November he visited the Bataclan with foreign guests and received them at the Elysée Palace).

Irrespective of the ways in which the public interprets these symbolic acts, it is worth noting that they are presented as inherently meaningful: thus, for instance and referring to January, Hollande's communication advisor suggests that the work on schedule and presentation was intended to give an 'impression of freedom of movement during these five days [which] contributed to create a sense of unity'. The government routinely uses verbal and non-verbal symbols to grant more authority to its pronouncements. Solemnity and rituals are 'part of the magic of the Republic' contends the Elysée Communication advisor. They were consciously, as well as routinely and unreflectively, used in 2015. Indeed, whether the President speaks from the Elysée Palace, at homage ceremonies or on an official visit, whether he delivers a long or an impromptu speech or interacts with journalists, settings are important: opulent period furniture in the background (*'les ors de la République'*), the courtyard of the Elysée Palace with Republican Guards or the flags all symbolically emphasise that the President 'does not speak as a person but as a symbol of the people who elected him by universal suffrage'. Observing the public performances of the President during the weeks that

followed both events, one can see how his demeanour and his engagements carried messages about the situation, as the elected representative of the French people and as the Head of State. At ceremonies and at site visits, he stood, sombre and often silent, to demonstrate the resilience of the Nation against adversity, its compassion towards the victims and their families, and its gratitude to police officers and emergency staff.

In January, the President was seen rather than heard. He delivered short statements on 7 and 9 January at the end of the two police raids; he gave a short eulogy at the ceremony for the three police officers in the *Préfecture's* courtyard (13 January 2015). Attention was paid to content as well as delivery to impart particular impressions on audiences. On the evening of 7 January, for instance, the objective was to allow for the more 'spontaneous expression of emotion and of compassion' and 'the drama of the situation' (Elysée interview). These two '*adresses à la Nation*' (7 and 9 January) were 'voluntarily unscripted', 'unrehearsed'. They were delivered from the Elysée Palace 'in a very simple, very direct style'. At a time when political communication is seen as overly scripted and contrived, great effort was made to produce an impression of authenticity and to limit accusations of partisan spin. The intention was to maintain the impression of the genuine character of the performance, an impression so fragile that it can disintegrate at any point (Goffman, 1979, p. 59). The idea here is not that emotions were fake, but that conveying them appropriately is very difficult and that the injunction 'be spontaneous' is hard to fulfil. These televised messages were among the most watched presidential televised speeches ever: on 7 January, 21 million people watched Hollande deliver a short message in France alone. The figure was interpreted as a sign that the country was looking up to the Elysée for republican leadership. Emergency communication to provide information and also show the rapid response of the State was also used in November. Hollande spoke briefly on 13 November, while the raid on the music venue was still ongoing; and again on 18 November after the police intervention against the terrorists' hiding place in St Denis.

Decisions were taken by the President who held innumerable meetings at the Elysée Palace (Presidency), but there was a clear division of labour in January between the President and the other two key figureheads in terms of communications. Usually seen silent behind the President (as at the offices of Charlie Hebdo, at the Bataclan, at various ceremonies, etc.), the PM and the Interior Minister expressed themselves in formal (Assemblée nationale or Sénat, outside the Elysée Palace, Matignon Hotel (PM's offices) or Beauvau Hotel (Interior Ministry)) and informal settings. In particular, they toured the high-impact radio and TV stations and major news programmes (TF1, Europe 1, France Inter, BFM, etc.), they tweeted a lot and were highly visible on the social media. They offered official and informal statements and were widely interviewed on location. The Constitution

of the Fifth Republic prevents the President from going to the Chambers of Parliament (Palais Bourbon et Palais du Luxembourg). Thus, the major policy speeches were delivered, respectively, by PM Valls (to the Assemblée Nationale) and Interior Minister Cazeneuve (to the Senate) on 13 January. As a notable change with January, the President found in November several opportunities to give lengthy speeches. Following a suggestion from the PM, the President convened the Parliament in Congress (16 November). This was widely interpreted as a deeply symbolic gesture showing political unity. Indeed, the Congress, which brings together both Chambers to the Versailles Palace, has met only 16 times since 1958, to revise the Constitution, to ratify EU enlargements, and twice to allow the President to address the representatives of the Nation (in 2009 and in 2015). Moreover, he addressed the French Mayors' conference (18 November), gave award at the Chirac Foundation and, last but not least, presided the homage ceremony at Les Invalides (27 November).

Symbolic practices (including the presidential and parliamentary pomp) have been used by the government to signal the national and international importance of the two events and to signal how seriously it focused its attention on resolving the crises. They served to reinforce claims to legitimacy as well as to credibility of the government's frames and actions.

4. The government's rhetorical framing of the 2015 terrorist attacks

We now turn to the rhetorical frames the government deployed in January and November to describe and explain the events, the Nation's and the executive's responses. These frames were composed with three other important actors in mind: the opposition, public opinion and the press.

We focus on the initial period, the first few days or weeks. Despite the acceleration of the news cycle and the reactions of other political actors, the government usually retains an advantage as it attempts to establish its definition of the events and their consequences. Such a privilege is due to the fact that it communicates at a time when others are still silent (Bensa and Fassin, 2002, p. 11; Groeling and Baum, 2008) or cautious. Indeed, in both January and November, the highest authorities (President, PM and Interior minister) rushed to location to assess the situation and comment informally before rivals and commentators could do so. The President named the targets, the victims and labelled the perpetrators in his early messages to the nation (7 and 9 January and then again in 13 and 18 November). The interpretations and the frames were refined in the following days. Although being the first to define the event allows the government a degree of latitude in the choice of frames it privileges, this is not a choice devoid of constraints: at minimum the interpretations have to be credible and to resonate with

the public mood as well as expectations (Kuypers, 2006, p. 5). Failing to do so could create embarrassment or backfire.⁹

For a short period of time during a crisis, the government remains the only source of reliable information:¹⁰ it speaks with authority (partly comforted in its position by the staging discussed above) and with better knowledge than anyone else, be it the opposition or the media. Thus, during an initial period, the ‘elasticity of reality’ plays in the interest of the government (Baum and Groeling, 2010). The duration of this liminal period during which reality is ‘elastic’ varies and it has shrunk with the speed of news and the ability of the Internet and broadcast media to connect with social networks, to use amateur videos, etc. Despite this advantage, the government has to work relentlessly to dominate the mass and social media. The latter have become particularly important as a source of alternative information for the government as well as for the public: the social media spread news and rumours. In recent years, the government uses it to gauge public moods and respond to them. Far from merely relaying official speeches, television played in January a highly unusual role, relaying rumours picked up on social media, sending camera crews on location as soon as they got whiff that something might be happening. News channels were on ‘breaking news’ coverage for 3 days. At both the Elysée Palace and the Matignon Hotel, the *cabinets* (the chief of staff and close advisors) followed events on their screens as much as through communication with the teams on the ground until the simultaneous assaults on the two sites (where the terrorists were entrenched). A member of the PM’s team explained: ‘We were following events on TV in my office then at some point I noticed that there were no new images and the PMs told me that the raid had started.’ Broadcasters, who had sent cameras to the sites, were ordered to introduce a 30-minute delay in their live feeds because the government was concerned that terrorists would be able to anticipate the police raids through watching TV. Having been reprimanded in January for endangering the public (and particularly the hostages at the kosher supermarket), the media focused their attention in November on the victims and on the emergency support services (contributing to reinforce the trauma of the event).

It is important to remember that the government prepares its communication with an eye on the constant flux of public opinion, gathered through qualitative and quantitative studies conducted on a daily basis, online and offline, and

⁹This is true whether or not these governmental interpretations are taken up or on the contrary challenged. In contrast with 2015, the government appeared to rush a terrorist frame in the few hours following the 14 July 2016 killings in Nice.

¹⁰In 2004, the incumbent Spanish government quickly accused Basque terrorists of the Madrid bombings only to be proven wrong a few hours later, undermining its trustworthiness within a few days of general elections (Bali, 2007; Montalvo, 2012).

through the analysis of the messages and letters received by the President's office. The government needs to be in sync with public opinion because if the government fails to get its message across, others will. So, the government's reactions to the events in January and November were different in their tone not only because the two terrorist attacks differed in their targets, in their magnitude or in the origins of the perpetrators, but also because they were calibrated to the perceived expectations and moods of the public (characterised by a will to gather in January yet by more of a will to retaliate in November).

To help the dissemination of their frame the executive trio, composed of the President, the PM and the Interior Minister, maximised their exposure in the mass and social media. They proposed a diagnostic of the problem (the symptoms and its causes) and a course of action to remedy it (Benford and Snow, 2000). As the enquiries progressed, the frames proposed by the government were tuned to the parameters of the event, including the perceived public mood. Set phrases were worked on in the following days so that the government could be 'on message'. The frame was then recycled from speeches to interviews and circulated widely in the media. It defined the situation at the same time as it articulated (and thereby attempted to legitimise) responses. It was Manichean and simple, and also encapsulated the familiar naming, blaming, claiming pattern (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat, 1980).

The President announced that France was facing 'cowardice' (twice), 'obscurantism', 'barbarism', 'fundamentalism' and 'infamy' perpetrated by 'assassins' (7 January 15). In November, the President's first short statement expressed 'horror'. Following a framework similar to the one adopted in January, he contrasted 'terrorists' and 'criminals' spreading 'terror'.

Defining the attacks as domestic or international plays an important part in the framing process and contributes to shape the governmental actions as well as the public's reactions. Although the terrorists at *Charlie Hebdo* had claimed (and had been filmed) to be acting in the name of an international cause, framing them as international terrorists was not straightforward and initially rejected by the President: the terrorists were 'crazy fanatics, who have nothing to do with Islam' (Hollande, 9 January). Their social and education backgrounds exposed the failings of the French integration model. On the contrary, the November attacks had been carefully 'planned abroad – in Syria and Belgium – and carried with French accomplices'.¹¹ They relied on external support and coordination. Although some of the perpetrators were French, the magnitude of the organisation involved and the death tolls were on different scales.

Chowanietz argues that political responses to acts of terrorism are starker when the State itself is targeted (Chowanietz, 2016, p. 157). His analysis is

¹¹Valls, Assemblée nationale, 19 November 2015.

confirmed by our interviewees in the Elysée Palace and at Matignon Hotel. In January, the victims of the attacks were immediately seen as being symbolically charged. The satirical journal had not been picked by chance: it had received many death threats (particularly since the publication of the Danish cartoons of Mohammed) and the editor was under police protection. According to interview respondents at Matignon and the Elysée palace, the framing proposed by the government 'presented itself, it merely 'unveiled what was implicit'. Speaking to journalists in front of the police station where the policeman killed in front of Charlie Hebdo's offices worked, the PM said 'they wanted to attack France to its heart, they assassinated journalists and police staff' (7 January 2015). The President was explicit in naming the symbolic targets attacked by the terrorists: 'Today, the Republic was attacked. The Republic is freedom of speech. The Republic is culture, it is creation, it is pluralism and it is democracy. This is what the assassins were aiming at. It is the ideal of justice and peace that France carries everywhere on the international scene'.¹² As events unfolded, the framing by the government evolved. The next day a policewoman was shot in an apparently random incident (she was attending to a traffic incident). The symbolic meaning of the killing only emerged for the government when the connection was made with the attack on the kosher supermarket, the following day. It was immediately qualified as a 'horrifying anti-Semitic act'. Whether or not the assassin indeed shot the policewoman because she wore a uniform, this interpretation was nevertheless proposed by the government. In later speeches, the State (three police officers killed) and the Nation (the Jewish community as part of the national community) were also identified as targets. Despite the shock, however, the executive also insisted that France was 'great' and 'strong' and remained 'a Nation who knows how to defend itself, strengthened by its values (liberty was repeated five times), its 'democracy' and its 'heroes' (Hollande, 9 January).

We can trace the similar use of categories and arguments in November. In Versailles, the President described the attack as 'an aggression against our country, its values, its youth, its lifestyle'; again, the 'cowardly assassins' and 'despicable killers' were opposed to the 'passionate, valiant and brave French people'. He clarified that the target was 'France', a France that 'loves life, culture, sport, partying, a France without distinction of colour, origin, path or religion. The France the assassins wanted to kill was the youth, in its diversity (. . .) a France opened to the world.' A few days later, the PM made the same argument to the Assemblée Nationale: 'On Friday, terrorists did not randomly choose their targets. They hit the youth, full of life, aspiring to emancipation through knowledge, its taste for difference, culture, music, a curiosity about the Other. Let us not be mistaken:

¹² Accessed at <<http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/allocution-a-la-suite-de-l-attentat-au-siege-de-charlie-hebdo/>>. on 30 March 2017

terrorism has hit France not for what it does – in Iraq, Syria or in the Sahel – but for what it is.¹³

A recurring theme follows from the identification of France as the victim: the need to preserve its strength and cohesion. In the very short message of 7 January, ‘unity’ was repeated twice and presented the best ‘weapon’ against terrorism. The second half of the message drew from this very lexicon: ‘solidarity’, ‘fraternity’, ‘nothing can divide us, nothing must oppose us, nothing must separate us’. President Hollande announced he would ‘bring together’ the people, propose a ‘common’ response, so that the country could ‘stand as one’ (*faire bloc*). ‘Gathering’ and ‘let’s gather’ were both repeated twice. Such a focus on unity responded to concerns about inter-community violence that were taken very seriously. The government had received reports about possible backlash against the French Muslim community and was concerned about the prospect of civil conflicts. As a consequence, there was a particular emphasis on distinguishing Islam from the ideology of the terrorists¹⁴ and showing the support of religious leaders. At the same time, however, the public mood expressed in letters and emails to the President spoke of a ‘call to republican values as a means to respond to the attack and defend the community’. ‘Two things really struck us immediately’, an Elysée advisor told us, ‘the spontaneous demonstrations and the audience of the televised speech on the Wednesday. It was not innocent. The Nation was united. It needed no-one to happen. In reality it is sometimes enough to name things, to give words to name what is already happening’. This contributes to explain the decision to focus energy on staging a large demonstration of national unity (to which we return below) and a self-legitimizing satisfaction with the outcome. The President’s communication advisor considers that there is no other means of evaluating how effective the strategy was but to consider the counterfactual: ‘there could have been street fights, (...) there were none. There were a few incidents but nothing dramatic. There could have been hate between social groups. It was not the case because there was this will to appease; to unite and not stigmatise anyone.’

The dominant trope in November was quite different. The PM alone had mentioned war in his 13 January speech to the Assemblée Nationale—at a time when the President insisted on unity. During the summer, his office commissioned a report to prepare the response in case of another major attack (Dive, 2016). The government indeed expected that intelligence or luck would fail to

¹³Prime Minister’s speech on a government’s bill proposing the extension of the state of emergency for another three months, 19 November 2015.

¹⁴Interestingly, surveys show that a long-term trend of improving degrees of tolerance towards all minorities has not been disrupted by 2015 events (Commission Nationale Consultative Des Droits de l’Homme, 2016, p. 289). The same study, however, highlights increased concerns over racism.

prevent such an occurrence, it was a matter of time. As anticipated, the repetition created a different atmosphere, in the public, the Opposition and the media and required a new strategy for the executive. Indeed, *Le Monde* reported that the President considered that ‘things are different this time. What will be important is that, this time, the response involves action, not mere symbols.’¹⁵ Such an analysis of the situation meant that the government adopted a distinct style, insisting on the determination of the government to fight terrorism: the lexicon mobilised included decision, demand, call, mobilisation as well as necessity and duty (‘we must’ is repeated five times). The government’s strategy was decided after the meetings of the Defence council and council of ministers (14 November). From then on the events of the previous day were qualified as ‘acts of war perpetrated by a terrorist army’.¹⁶ During the weekend, speechwriters worked on phrases that could resonate with the public’s emotions and reactions and define the event and the appropriate reaction. The message, again, was simple and now well-rehearsed: ‘this act of war perpetrated by a terrorist army that hit French people of all ages and all colours’.¹⁷ In Versailles, ‘war’ was used five times in the first four minutes of the President’s speech. Moreover, the government considered that the popular mood was oriented towards confronting terrorism. Opinion research conducted by the Elysée web team and messages received in the first few hours were in stark contrast with the aspirations to national unity that had characterised messages in January. They expressed anger and a ‘call to arms’, with many correspondents asking to join the military and police forces. The lexicon and the actions were selected from the existing repertoire, or invented, but the objective was to ‘help make it happen’ and, in the speech to the Congress, the President talked about drawing on the ‘reserve’ as a link between the army and the Nation. The PM repeated to the *Assemblée Nationale* a few days later: ‘we are at war! (. . .) this new type of war remains a war, planned by a criminal army’ (19 November 2015). The response of France after 13 November was to be ‘merciless’ and the objective was to ‘retaliate’ and ‘eliminate’ the ‘barbarians’, to ‘destroy Daesh’. The analysis justified implicitly the policies deployed by the government. The government also needed to demonstrate through acts the validity of its interpretations: beyond words, framing what happened as war involved symbols such as police on the streets, house raids, legislation and military investments.

¹⁵http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/11/21/la-folle-semaine-de-l-executif_4814720_823448.html#VKcw27KdxfS3RVZI.99, Accessed at 7 March 2016.

¹⁶The phrase is used twice in the first two sentences of the *Communiqué of the Conseil de Defense*, 14 November 2015.

¹⁷http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/11/16/comment-hollande-a-prepare-son-discours-du-congres_1413822, Accessed 24 April 2017.

Repetition is a rhetorical device designed to naturalise a frame, transform the interpretation of the thus-constructed event into a ‘fact’. It is important to connect the frames proposed by the government with the policies that are simultaneously announced as the former serves as an implicit justification for the latter. The objective, of course, is to influence the understanding of the events (Farge, 2002, p. 67), in order to shift power relationships and prepare public opinion for alternative futures (Bensa and Fassin, 2002, p. 10).

Having considered the rhetoric, we now turn to the efforts deployed to construct national unity in January and in November and show how the government mobilised different symbols in each case, contributing to build the events.

5. ‘L’esprit du 11 Janvier’ as national unity

We have argued in the previous section on rhetoric that, in January, the government was particularly sensitive to the need to prevent societal fractures and political disunity. Their strategy received considerable help at the time from willing political and community leaders. Nevertheless, it is important to give attention to the symbolic staging of such unity, which was produced by the executive.

Fortuitously, the leaders of religious communities were invited to the Elysée Palace on a scheduled event on 7 January: the New Year ritual in France involves the President presenting the wishes of the Republic to a diversity of social groups. Religious leaders were invited. The meeting was maintained because, according to the Communication advisor interviewed in June 2015, it was ‘an interesting symbol and one of the roles of the President is to prevent social division’. The next day, President Hollande received the Presidents of the Assemblée Nationale, of the Sénat and of the Association of French Mayors. They all came out advocating a ‘Republican response’ and national unity (Boussaguet and Faucher, 2017). In the meantime, the mobilisation of civil society was growing. There were spontaneous silent gatherings; the Mayor of Paris called for a march at the place de la République on the Thursday; the left, led by the socialist party, also planned a ‘republican’ march for the weekend. Surveys showed high levels of support for the idea of a staged performance of national unity. The success of such an event depended on the support of the parliamentary opposition. To alleviate his resistance to the idea of following a socialist party initiative, the PM gave a phone call to the Leader of the main opposition party (the former President, N. Sarkozy) in the evening of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack to invite the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) to participate in the organisation.¹⁸ The next day, Hollande received him at the Elysée with the presidential pomp and ceremony (due to his

¹⁸The former president had refused to take calls from the leader of the socialist party, considering that it was beneath his station.

rank as former President) to inform him of the situation, before he received the other party leaders. Each time a political or religious leader was interviewed on the steps of the Elysée, they spoke surrounded by symbols of the Republic.

As they reflected on how to pay homage to the victims and mark France's mourning, the executive's teams of advisors drew from past experiences and came up very fast with a list of rituals that were announced within hours: minutes of silence, flags and raising the level of alert. Since the events were presented as unique and requiring national unity, innovation seemed a logical development. A silent march appeared as the best way to show respect for the dead that could also avoid divisive public speeches explained Francois Lamy (Socialist MP and the official coordinator of the march), the PM's chef de cabinet and the Mayor's chief of staff. The government was drawn into the organisation at short notice of an extraordinary response of the political community. The march was carefully planned and choreographed so as to embody the unity of the country behind the victims. From the moment the march took an international dimension, three symbolically significant groups were organised: the victims' families; representatives of political parties, unions and civil society associations; and the executive and the international community. Locations were carefully chosen for their practicality (whether the area could be secured) as well as their symbolic significance (between *place de la Nation* and *place de la République*). Several moments had to be carefully timed to ensure memorable images: the President comforting the survivors; the row of 'VVIPs' (very very important persons) walking 100 yards arm-in-arm; the political and civil society leaders, side-by-side and without banners or signs; the silent crowd; and the iconic picture of the statue *place de la République* complete with demonstrators holding a giant pencil (Gürsel, 2017).

Everything happened very quickly: on the Friday evening, the President declared: 'I call on all French women and men to rise up on Sunday, together, to carry the values of democracy, freedom, pluralism to which we are all attached and that Europe represents' (Hollande, 9 January). Such a call was unprecedented.¹⁹ It can be read as an instance of the government's efforts to construct the unity of the nation while riding the tide of public opinion: as an Elysée official told us, the march 'only worked because the French people had decided to rise'. In a striking illustration of performative speech, the Interior Minister (and other officials) announced security measures that would allow the 'historic' and unprecedented demonstration. They also decided not to give official figures, thereby contributing to a rare consensus on the number of 'demonstrators'.

Within the space of a week, the government helped coordinate the largest demonstration in Paris since 1944, an international summit and a touching

¹⁹Mitterrand marched in protest against anti-Semitic acts in 1990 (Boussaguet and Faucher, 2017). The large gaullist rally of 30 May 1968 was more discretely organised (Georgi, 1995).

ceremony at the Prefecture (Boussaguet and Faucher, 2017). It mobilised its public relations expertise and resources to focus media and public attention on the President's effective and relentless handling of the crisis at a national as well as an international level. It benefited from the fact that all broadcasters had switched to a 'breaking news' format and were therefore eager to cover governmental communication and fill their airtime with images, interviews and live reports. The ballet of visitors to the Elysée Palace provided a useful focus for attention and an opportunity to frame national and political unity. It had been agreed that the march would be silent (to avoid the expression of any dissenting interpretation and politicisation) and without signs (to prevent antagonising sections of the public with offensive cartoons drawn from *Charlie Hebdo*). Marchers filled the void with symbols: flags and pencils, clapping and *Marseillaise*, a multitude of pictures of themselves in the crowd.

For several days, the media had no critical comment to make and even the Front National (FN) found itself in a tricky situation. Effectively, the government made the 11 January itself a secular ritual (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977). It was organised to enact public expectations but was also expected to help alter public perceptions of social fragmentation through 'imagable unity' (Gürsel, 2017, p. 138). Staging unity effectively created for a while the appearance of consensus (Baudot, 2015) and the week-long crisis ended with the PM receiving a standing ovation and MPs singing the *Marseillaise* after his speech to the Assemblée Nationale (13 January). This was a unique display of political unity at the end of a week rich in public rituals honouring the Republic, its values and its heroes. It highlighted the importance of the republican liturgy in France.

Such an impeccable demonstration of political unity and rallying around the Republic was, we have showed, carefully constructed. Other factors than a patriotic effect and political leadership contribute to explain why the Opposition followed the Government. With departmental elections three months away, political competition could be temporarily bracketed to confront an attack that was defined as targeting the Republic, the State and the Nation. The impression of unity and republicanism was maintained despite debates around the participation of the FN and whether this party could count as a republican political organisation. Indeed, since the 1980s, electoral coalitions designed to prevent the FN from winning seats have been called '*front républicain*'. Despite the support of public opinion for an inclusive march, parties were reluctant to normalise their opponent. The official organiser of the March, the socialist MP Lamy, had personally taken a clear position against the participation of the FN. The extreme left had also done so but the parliamentary right was reluctant to do so publicly. The President adopted an ambiguous position, offering Marine Le Pen special police protection during the Parisian march. Eventually, Le Pen self-excluded. She resolved the potential embarrassment by marching outside of Paris and denouncing

the strange national unity that excluded the opposition party leading in the polls. Yet, the pressure to rally was such that even the FN praised the ‘oecumenical role’ played by Hollande during the first week, as a close advisor of M. Le Pen told us. Despite the expected erosion on public opinion enthusiasm, new legislation on intelligence was adopted with wide support by both houses a few months later. The ambiguities carried by the government’s staging of national unity were not lost on the right and the extreme right. This largely explains the resistance encountered a few months later.

6. Rallying around the flag in November

Paradoxically, to demonstrate that a response is not only ‘symbolic’ (i.e. without effect) requires an emphasis on the performance and on the language used. In fact, the policy initiatives may be presented as deeds not words but, as we have seen, performance is a symbolic social practice. In November, the government drew once again from the traditional symbolic repertoire: a national day of mourning, flags at half mast, a minute of silence, ceremonies, democratic institutions, mobilisation of the State apparatus and of the President himself as Head of State, *Garde Républicaine*, views of the Elysée Palace, visibility of the military personnel, etc. Policies were symbolic in that they were developed through symbolic institutions, such as the Congress, or through the reassertion of the monopoly of violence.

The President repeated some of the performances that had worked so well in January to consolidate or demonstrate political unity. He received political leaders one after the other at the Elysée on 15 November. Despite this staging, it quickly appeared in November that the response from the right-wing opposition was less enthusiastic. On their way out, and on the very steps of the Elysée Palace, Sarkozy and Le Pen complained that the government had failed to protect France because it had not acted on the demands they had articulated in January.

The Congress was convened, following the suggestion of the PM, on the Monday 16 November. It was supposed to mark a symbolic crescendo from January’s dual speeches and to provide the setting for the display of political unity (Boussaguet and Faucher, 2017). The President made a series of announcements at the Congress to demonstrate that he had listened to his interlocutors and was taking on board some of their proposals: the state of emergency had been declared, a number of private homes had been searched and home arrests pronounced; the Interior Minister would ‘as soon as tomorrow call on his EU counterparts and invoke article 42-7 of the Treaty to require support at a time of aggression, because this enemy is not the enemy of France but the enemy of Europe’ (16 November). Budgetary commitments were made to increase the number of recruits in the police and the army, in the judiciary and in border controls, to ensure further investments in security and intelligence means, to allow

the tracking of weapons trafficking. The President promised advocating a Europe-wide air passenger database. He insisted: 'I consider that the security pact trumps the stability pact.' Naming the attacks as 'acts of war' justifies the use of military force. Words were accompanied by action: the President announced he had ordered the bombing of Raqqa (the stronghold of the organisation ISIS that had claimed responsibility for the Paris attacks) on 15 November. He confirmed that the deployment of police and military personnel in the streets would last. This is an interesting example of the performance of the exercise of the powers of the State. The presence of armed representatives of the State on the streets and metro stations is a deterrent to potential amateur terrorists but uniforms and military gear is also reassuring for a fraction of the population.

These initiatives could have been expected. On the other hand, the decision to reform the Constitution took everybody by surprise. It was yet another important symbolic gesture, signalling how important the President considered the need to reinforce the government's ability to act in response to terrorism and to do so within the frame of the rule of law (state of emergency). It also included a serious concession to the right and the extreme right: the destitution of French citizenship for bi-nationals convicted of terrorism. Indeed, this very suggestion had been previously rejected by the actors now in government. The reform was not expected to have any effect on terrorism,²⁰ but was responding to concerns around the definition of French identity and the redrawing of symbolic boundaries. The PM argued that 'the State could take measures that would be both symbolic and concrete'²¹ and also that 'when one is in France, symbols are important'.²²

The first criticisms of the government were publicly voiced within minutes and on Twitter by the FN and meetings with parliamentary party leaders had convinced the President that for the congress to be a successful show of unity, no debate could be allowed. He rejected the request for a debate after his address to the Congress, but the government could not prevent the raucous session of the Assemblée Nationale the following day. Outraged reactions from the public, and a caucus meeting of *Les Républicains*, brought discipline back on the benches of the Assemblée Nationale.

²⁰The bill that was submitted for advice to the Conseil d'Etat (CE) and the media speculated that the government was hoping that the CE would reject the proposition. The government would thus have been able to claim that it was open to suggestions since it had taken up the opposition's idea. CE, 'Avis sur le projet de loi constitutionnelle' www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/projets/pl3381-ace.pdf, Accessed at 10 March 16.

²¹PM Valls interviewed on France Inter on 11 December 2015, <http://www.franceinter.fr/emission-le-79-manuel-valls-le-programme-du-fn-cest-la-division>, Accessed at 10 March 16. See also *Le Monde* (23 December 2015).

²²'On n'est pas couché', France 2, 16 January 2016.

Why was the right particularly wary of granting its support to the government? Politics does not evaporate at times of crisis, even when it is paramount to appear patriotic and non-partisan. The first regional elections within the new legislative framework were three weeks away and the Opposition feared the political trappings of unconditional support. Polls on voting intentions indicated that the FN was the main beneficiary of the year's crises (terrorism, Greece, migrants, Syria) and was likely to win for the first time in three of them (Faucher and Garcia, 2016). There was a cost in leaving too much space for security concerns to be dominated by the FN: backbenchers and candidates on regional lists joined an initially timid but growing chorus of critics. On the other hand, there is a cost in appearing disloyal (Baum and Groeling 2009), which the right-wing elites (particularly the would-be candidates in the 2016 right-wing presidential primary) were not prepared to take. Opposition leaders talked about 'solidarity with the government' rather than 'national unity' and asked for concessions. Parliamentarians demanded that home searches be more visible and house arrests longer, that off-duty police officers be allowed to carry their weapons, the hardening of security and military response. Keen to show good will and meet the Opposition half way in order to secure its 'support', the Government took on board a number of these policies. The state of emergency was nearly unanimously adopted for 3 months (six votes against in the *Assemblée Nationale*).

The state of emergency outlawed demonstrations and the popular mood was more prone to panic movements enhanced by the fear of other incidents. The momentum of January was also impossible to reproduce, so the government organised a civil ceremony 2 weeks after the attacks (27 November). Normally used for military ceremonies and to honour national heroes, *Les Invalides* offered a symbolically significant setting as well as a closed and easily secured space. During the ceremony, the President stood alone to listen to the litany of 130 names. The conception of the ceremony drew from lessons learnt in January. The symbols of national unity that had emerged then were incorporated. The *Marseillaise* was played and two popular songs were sung by four women chosen to represent French diversity and culture. The November ceremony was comparatively a modest media event (Katz and Dayan, 1994) and no public event. The public unfortunately could not participate in the ceremony. In a highly unusual move in the French political context, the President told the Council of Ministers: 'every French person could also participate by adorning the front of their residence with French colours, a blue white red flag'.²³ Tricolours had been trending on Facebook and other social media, and the literal rally around the flag was

²³Compte rendu du Conseil des Ministres, 25 November 2015. On the use of the French flag in contemporary French politics, see Vincent Martigny (2016) "Que nous dit le drapeau sur l'identité française, 2012-16", *Conférence Symbopolitique*, LIEPP, Sciences Po, 22 January 2016.

widely commented in the press.²⁴ The Service d'Information du Gouvernement relayed the call with two other suggestions (selfies with three colours and posting on Twitter or social networks²⁵), thereby offering a symbolic toolbox to willing citizens, like flags to download on the official websites. Although flags were displayed, the government did not succeed in recreating the momentum of 11 January²⁶ and the injunction to use symbols was a poor replacement for participation in a secular ritual.

7. Conclusion

In January and in November 2015, France was confronted with two series of major coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris (a number of incidents and failed attacks were also recorded during the year). The events shocked France (and the world) and gave rise to a plurality of interpretations, transforming collective representations. A number of actors were involved in these processes. While the literature has looked at phenomenon of a rallying around the flag as a patriotic reflex (Mueller, 1985) and considered the conditions under which public opinion (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003; Collins, 2004), the Opposition (Chowanietz, 2016) or the media (Kuypers, 2006) are likely to support the government, our analysis is unique in that it provides insight about the political and symbolic work necessary to make such reactions possible. The strategies developed in both instances are good examples of how contemporary politics mobilises the symbolic, a dimension of public policy that is often neglected. We have argued that the French government mobilised symbols and symbolic practices to provide key narratives of France's resilience. We have shown how it framed the crises and their resolution as moments in which it acted decisively and united the Nation. The government interpreted what had happened and presented itself as retaking control of the monopoly of violence. At the same time, we show that the repetition of incidents weakened the position of the government, as they had anticipated.

The French government was quite successful in creating an impression of consensus in January to the extent that *'l'esprit du 11 Janvier'* (Valls, 13/11) remains one of the key interpretations of what happened in January 2015. In the months that followed, it engaged in a learning process and became more acutely aware of the importance of symbolic politics: some of the mistakes of January were not reproduced in November. Innovations were necessary, they were not always

²⁴For instance: 'Planète Bleu Blanc Rouge', *Le Monde* (21 November 15).

²⁵<http://www.gouvernement.fr/partagez-hommage-national>, Accessed at 13 March 2016.

²⁶Parodic uses were also noted, including adorning windows with three-coloured pieces of clothing.

successful. If anything, the use of political symbols is never straightforward because each attack takes place in an ever-changing context. This is not surprising if we consider how symbols condense a variety of meanings that affect differently different categories of the population. Moreover, the context brings specific constraints on the ability to mobilise symbols effectively, and on the appropriateness of some symbols according to circumstances and the public mood.

Further research needs to investigate how political elites and their entourage understand and manipulate political symbols, and to what extent these symbolic actions contribute to restore order after a crisis. In November, the government successfully managed the initial phases of the crisis but failed to reach a definitive closure (Boin *et al.*, 2011). In particular, it failed to bring to a conclusion the projected reform of the constitution, which was abandoned in May 2016 in the face of divisions within the Left. The executive was thus symbolically weakened when more terrorist attacks were perpetrated on the French Riviera in July 2016. Then, national unity lasted but a few hours: locally, the Opposition reacted quickly and aggressively, blaming the government for the failure to prevent terrorism; the government was literally booed in Nice and struggled for weeks to appease the debate. This contrasted with the two other attacks perpetrated in June and July. The comparison between January and November 2015 offered a first overview, which needs to be deepened thanks to the comparison with the Nice case in July 2016 in France and also with attacks in other national contexts, like Brussels in March 2016 or more recently London and Manchester (March, May and June 2017). This would contribute to a theory of political symbols and how they are mobilised by political actors.

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