

The Political Scientist, the President and his Post

by Christophe Le Digol

**How do citizens view the power of the President of the Republic?
An analysis of letters sent to the Élysée Palace reveals the
relationship between French citizens and their head of state, as well
as the role played by an invisible service: the presidential post
office.**

Reviewed: Julien Fretel and Michel Offerlé, *Écrire au président. Enquête sur le guichet de l'Élysée*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021. 320 p., 20 €.

The presidential election is traditionally presented as the encounter between a man and a nation. In this view, the President supposedly nurtures a close relationship to the French people, even though anyone with the slightest bit of common sense can see that this is not the case. In all likelihood, the President of the Republic will never meet most of the voters who have voted for him, let alone all of the citizens he claims to represent. Despite this obvious point, many voters, despite never having met the President, seem taken in by this idea of presidential proximity, and some of them, without the real reasons for this being clear, sometimes send him letters. In *Écrire au président. Enquête sur le guichet de l'Élysée* ("Writing to the President. An Enquiry into the Élysée's Mail Room") Michel Offerlé, emeritus professor of sociology at ENS-Ulm, and Julien Fretel, professor of political science at Université Paris 1, examine these letters sent by citizens to the President of the Republic. Their hypothesis is that "the letters sent by the French people to the Élysée Palace allow us [...] to interrogate the institution of the presidency, and thus the representation of power and the forms in which it is embodied (as covered by the concept of

“presidentialisation”, the use of which most often refers to a black box) from a different perspective than that of legal experts, but also differently to the way in which political scientists have approached the matter up until now” (p. 15). In the event, and unlike what we are used to seeing, political representation is not analysed in terms of the election, but on the basis of hitherto unseen epistolary material. For various reasons, some citizens send letters to the President who – one may or may not be surprised by this – answers them. And, unlike voters, these correspondents write, formulate and elaborate their opinion, sent – for better or for worse – to the President of the Republic¹. This relationship, which is objectively practical and therefore objectifiable, provides the object of enquiry of an empirically dense book which introduces stimulating theoretical questions.

Working (on) the Institution of the Presidency

The institutions of power *naturally* tend to resist attempts to sociologically objectify them, meaning non-indigenous ways of describing their activities and what they are. There is no doubt that the institution of the Presidency is no exception here, as is suggested by the weakness of the academic literature devoted to this institution despite its being essential to understanding the workings of the political sector under the Fifth Republic (p. 13). This literature always, or almost always, examines it from the outside, without involving it, which necessarily affects the quantity, quality and nature of the data that can be used in the analysis². Though it may not make a habit of it, the Élysée Palace here gave its permission to two political scientists for them to work on the letters received by the President every day. As these two researchers tell us from the introduction, patience is the mother of all virtue when you are carrying out research, and, after an ever-too-long wait, access to the Élysée was granted them at the end of François Hollande’s term in office. But authorisation is not always enough to obtain the materials one needs for one’s investigation: it is often essential to be given the tacit agreement of the stakeholders contributing to the process described, here namely of the *Service de la Correspondance Présidentielle* (SCP –

¹ We should remind readers here that, unlike many people think, a ballot paper is never the expression of an opinion, but rather of a choice.

² A good example is the fundamental book by Jacques Lagroye and Bernard Lacroix (ed.), *Le président de la République. Usages et genèses d’une institution*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1992.

“Presidential Correspondence Office”), and one sometimes requires their active collaboration. What makes this enquiry so rich is the support of all those who intervened at various points in the process of managing the correspondence: from former presidents of the Republic (Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande) who agreed to give interviews to (former) managers of the correspondence office, right through to the agents that process the mail received by the Élysée on a daily basis, the volume of which varies depending on the president and on current political events.

Given the abundance of the material they were provided with, the authors decided not to attempt an exhaustive and statistical analysis of the correspondence (p. 25) , preferring instead to work on samples “in a more random than methodical manner” (p. 78) and thus to read several thousands of letters sent to François Hollande, while also examining a more limited amount of Nicolas Sarkozy’s correspondence, and ending with that of Emmanuel Macron. The enquiry is thus very well structured in terms of the quantity and quality of the data used in its analysis. Throughout its seven chapters, the book invites its readers to follow the institutional process of processing the letters: from their reception to the administrative conditions of their management, and then of the production of the responses to them. The book, which is keen to claim it is aimed at the general public, rigorously renders and describes, in clear and comprehensible language, the practical challenges inherent to the management of the presidential correspondence – even if a slightly better informed reader may notice, through a few throwaway comments or certain omissions, the authors’ desire to somewhat handle with kid gloves the institution that generously opened its doors to them.

An Administrative Process

No letter writer really expects to receive a letter personally drafted by the President of the Republic. It is nevertheless surprising to learn that the office responsible for the presidential correspondence employs so many people. Michel Offerlé and Julien Fretel present this office in the first chapter, and briefly summarise its short but already rich history. Created in 1959 “as an emanation of the president’s personal secretariat” (p. 37), this office initially had around twenty employees, then 65 in 1978, and around 70 today. Since it was created, the office’s practical organisation and name have changed: in 2020, it became the *Service de la*

Communication Directe (SCD – “Direct Communication Office”). That fact that such a large amount of human resources (10% of the Élysée staff) are invested in running the office responsible for the presidential correspondence would surprise any observer well-acquainted with the analysis of institutions. This is why any slightly curious political scientist will wonder what stakes – though they may not always be explicitly recognised as such – are at play in the work carried out by this office for the presidential institution and whoever is the current holder of this position.

The epistolary material, which is presented in chapters 2 to 4, appears as a jumble of letters in a wide range of formats and styles: there are those who attempt to respect forms of politeness that might legitimately be expected by a president, and those who directly insult him because of an unfortunate phrase or the policies implemented during this term; some letters pledge support, others make last-chance requests; there are holiday postcards or letters revealing suicidal impulses. One has to admit that this material displays no unity of tone, or unity of style or content. But it is this administrative office’s job to sort, classify, forward on and respond to the senders of this abundant correspondence. The latter is immediately classified into three categories: reserved correspondence from known institutions and correspondents; requests that position the president as a last resort in the face of injustice; “opinions” which “comment, criticise, suggest, note, opine” (p. 21). Each category of classification has its own presidential figure: one of presidential authority for some, last resort for others, indignity for those who note a gap between the dignity of the function and the inadequacy of the person occupying it, etc. There is a multiplicity of relationships to the president, from institutional deference to a casual intimacy expressed by the use of the informal *tu* (“you”), in marked defiance of protocol. Nevertheless, if their perspective and analyses are considered to be of a high enough standard, some letters are deemed worthy of being shown to the President (p. 191-199). However they are classified, the SCD’s function is to respond to them, and the system that organises these responses is rigorously outlined in Chapter 6, including the system governing the apposing of the president’s signature, thus giving a truly political meaning to the Élysée correspondence.

On the Political Uses of Correspondence

Starting from this terrain, we see emerge a classical object of political science: political representation. Although they do not clearly state this, the work of the two

political scientists doubtless allows us to understand the way in which this raw material becomes a political asset at the end of a process that is both administrative and political: an epistolary practice (letters and emails), which at first sight has no clear meaning beyond its addressee, is transformed into *political assets* which are apparently unimportant, but which the President can make certain political uses of – uses which are discrete to say the least, but effective. Thus, Michel Offerlé and Julien Fretel systematically describe an institutional work of ordering and shaping the raw material constituted by this correspondence.

Initially, the department converts this raw material into an instrument for understanding “public opinion”. For a long time, a qualitative use of this correspondence was deemed sufficient to gain this understanding. But its statistical analysis (Chapter 5) became more widespread under François Hollande, and increased with Emmanuel Macron (Chapter 7). It may not be a coincidence that statistical analysis was implemented following the scandal of the Élysée opinion polls. Deprived of this means of *directly* investigating and “understanding” public opinion, and although these letters are tools of individual expression, the Élysée now tends to reduce them to numbers and statistical measures. As the authors show very well, this marks a significant change in the relationship between the institution and these letters and their writers.

And, from instruments for understanding public opinion, they are then changed into a political tool through the development in the ways the institution of the presidency uses them. Indeed, these letters were used from very early on as an imperfect remedy to presidential isolation. The regular reading of some of them, selected by the SCP, provides the President with a window onto the public opinion and feelings of the French people, or at least of those that pick up their pens to write to him. Thus, this understanding allows the President to adjust his self-presentation and “communication” strategies in relation to the French people, though without necessarily having an influence on his decisions (p. 183). Extracts from these letters, which are sometimes included in his speeches, present him as a president who is listening to the French people. Doubtless it is this handful of uses that constitute the *raison d’être* of the administrative system which scrupulously responds to the letters sent: to highlight and present the presidential proximity to the French, of whom he is in practice the most physically distant representative. The symbolic proximity generated by the epistolary relationship provides an answer to the practical remoteness of the resident of the Élysée Palace. Furthermore, is it necessary to add that the epistolary form itself is a very prosaic expression of this remoteness? The

written word remains the only means – and sometimes the last resort – of being heard for those who cannot have the President’s ear, as do evening visitors to the Élysée Palace for example.

What Political Science does to Politics

No doubt this review would feel incomplete if it did not conclude with a question which political science books rarely ask explicitly – and the present book, in spite of its qualities, is no exception: what effects does a work of political science produce on its subjects? The book’s publication date, right in the midst of the campaign for the presidential election, suggests at the very least an intention to take advantage of the political attention paid by voters and the media to the (future) occupant of the Élysée Palace. This is the least one could expect from a publishing house like La Découverte and from authors who, as a general rule, enjoy being read. But does this book, in spite of its descriptive nature and its political reserve, not affect the public representations of the President of the Republic? Indeed, Michel Offerlé and Julien Fretel were invited by the media to present their work, which was then given a large amount of publicity for a work of political science that is rigorous and far removed from the dynamics of sensationalism and journalistic scoops.

There is a certain logic to the letters, most of which are addressed personally to the President, remaining a private affair between the institution and their writers. It is rare for this individual and sometimes intimate discourse to cross the boundaries of the institution and be given publicity, be it in the political, media or academic sphere. Doubtless we have here the first effect of the work of these two political scientists, namely that they *give public existence* to opinions – anonymized ones – that were never meant to be made public³. It reveals the relationship that is created on this occasion between the letter writers and the President. For any interested reader, this can spontaneously appear as a natural representation, even though the authors describe in detail the series of practical operations through which this epistolary representation is turned into a representation as a result of the bureaucratic work carried out by the Élysée offices on a daily basis.

³ It also tends to make known an office that was until this point unknown to citizens, and the work carried out by this office. In fact, the members of said office publicly thanked the authors on the social network LinkedIn.

Nevertheless, does the publicizing of these letters and of the administrative work carried out by the *Élysée*, even within an academic book, not support or even strengthen the claims to represent citizens which are already made by the institution of the presidency? The long and sometimes truculent extracts published in the book show that the correspondents, by sending a letter to the President, are at least acknowledging an institutional function that is difficult to deny under the Fifth Republic. But they do not necessarily suggest that said correspondents are accepting the constitutional fiction that the President represents all French people (p. 145-149): “Really, this year’s budget confirms that you are the crappiest president I have seen in my 63 years of life” (p. 59). Part of the correspondents do not feel represented by one or the other president, and challenge their style or their political actions, even though they tend to accept, sometimes with fatalism and sometimes with conviction, the representative fiction that is performed by the constitution through the election of the president by universal suffrage. We must therefore make a distinction between an effect of position and imposition which the correspondents are recognising by sending their letters to the *Élysée*, and an effect of acknowledgement of the status and stature of the President, which is clearly not shared by all correspondents. In fact, it is no accident that the letters full of insults are systematically left out of the classification, like a denial by the institution of those correspondents who do not respect either the requisite form or the function of the addressee. As the authors suggest, we must know how to tell the difference between the institution of the presidency and its incarnations. One of the lessons of this book is aimed at understanding to what extent the analysis of assets of representation allows us to gain some distance from the constitutional fiction which analysts, be they legal experts or not, have too often had a tendency to unquestioningly accept.

To conclude, can political scientists escape from this division of political work which, with this kind of object *s*, tends in spite of itself to draw political science into the work of legitimising a particular political activity? One of the rare ways of avoiding this is probably to give up on immediately making accessible the results of one’s research to the greatest number of people, and instead to address only a restricted audience of academic peers, even if this means limiting access to a sociologically informed knowledge of the *Élysée* to sociologists and political scientists. This would be a rather elitist strategy, which has its supporters, based on the logic of the autonomy of scientific research, but which has the disadvantage of reserving certain forms of knowledge to political science experts. Conversely, a second strategy would be to immediately reveal to the general public the political issues and uses of the letters, by including reflexive analyses on the relationship of

political scientists to their objects of study and on the effects of scientific productions on politics, even if this means the Élysée definitively closing its doors to political scientists and thus depriving them – and the general public – of a better understanding of how it works. This is a scientific dilemma which political scientists are regularly confronted with in one way or another, and which constantly raises anew the question of the scientific autonomy of a discipline in relation to its object of study.

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