



The Changing French Party System

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The Changing French Party System

When we think of contemporary French politics the features we often think of first are electoral disorder and political instability. Those features are particularly evident from the electoral contests of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but one has to stress the fact that instability and variability of electoral behaviour were not absent from the French political scene in the earlier stages of the Fifth Republic (Grunberg, 1985, p.430-434). Since the late 1950s, the political pendulum did oscillate at irregular intervals between the Left and the Right at both national and local elections. Over this period of time, the electoral strength of the two major political blocks have been fairly equally balanced only twice in 1978 and 1988 (Charlot, 1993, p.271). Subsequently, major developments in French politics have been the changes of Governments and the alternations in power within a bipolar framework (Patriat, 1995, p.286).

However, a significant trend in recent years has been the increasing de-structuration of the party system and the weakening of the traditional parties of the Left and the Right. The 1992, 1993 and 1994 elections were noteworthy for the strong rejection of the PS by the voters, and the tendency to fragmentation of party politics. At the 1992 regional election, the socialists proved to be extremely unpopular and collapsed to 16.4 per cent of the polls whilst the PC gained only 8.7 per cent and the RPR-UDF over 33 per cent.

These results contrasted with the breakthrough of the Ecologists (14.4 per cent) and the increase of the FN first-ballot score (13.9 per cent). The dramatic decline of the PS was revealed by its score at the parliamentary election of March 1993 with only 19 per cent of the valid votes cast (compared with 37 per cent in 1988 and 32 per cent in 1986), followed by its worst performance at the European election of June 1994 (14.5 per cent). In 1993, the whole of the Left was at its lowest level with 32 per cent of the polls.

The winners of election were the RPR and the UDF, with a first-ballot score of 44 per cent and a massive majority of 485 seats in Parliament (including Centre-Right allies). Faced with the presence of

many minor ecologist candidates outside the Entente, the alliance of Génération Ecologie and the Greens totalled 7.6 per cent of the vote. With 12.4 per cent of the poll, the Front national came ahead of the Communists (9.2 per cent). Although the extreme-right won no seats, its score was more than 2.7 points up on the result of 1988.

The results of the 1995 presidential election showed some signs of recovery on the left side of the political spectrum and the PS hegemony on the Left was somewhat restored : Jospin came first with a first-ballot vote of 23.3 per cent and was able to stand at the second ballot. Opposing Chirac, the socialist candidate gained 47.3 per cent in the second round: this was the lowest PS score since 1974. Moreover, the PS vote in the first round of the 1995 election was still lower than Mitterrand's performances in 1981 (26.1 per cent) and 1988 (34.1 per cent).

The three candidates of the mainstream right-wing - namely Chirac, Balladur and de Villiers - secured 44 per cent of the valid votes cast. The PC score remained under the threshold of 10 per cent of the poll (8.6 per cent) whereas the far-right increased its electoral support up to 4,571,138 votes (15 per cent) and the extreme-left achieved political relevance with Laguiller's first-ballot historic performance of 5.3 per cent. Standing as the single candidate for the Green movement, Voynet won a 3.3 per cent which raised doubts about the ability of the Ecologists to survive outside a tactical alliance with the mainstream parties.

Flow of the Vote (1993-1995)

Vote 1993	Vote 1995 (1st Round)							
	Laguil.	Hue	Jospin	Voynet	Balladur	Chirac	Villiers	Le Pen
Ext.left	29	24	27	8	5	3	2	0
PC	5	64	15	2	3	2	1	8
PS	5	8	69	2	6	5	1	4
Greens	12	6	18	23	13	13	4	10
UDF/RPR	2	1	3	1	38	38	8	9
FN	0	1	1	0	8	4	5	81
Others	0	0	27	3	30	17	7	16
NA	7	7	21	4	17	21	5	17

Exit-Polls Survey, IFOP-Libération, 25 April 1995.

After the 1995 presidential and municipal elections, there was some evidence that the balance of political forces had been notably shifting towards the Right since the late 1980s. Figures for the 1997 legislative election proved to be rather different : again the pendulum of French politics swung from one camp to another. In 1993 voters expressed their

strong wish to remove the PS from office : the success of the mainstream Right was far from being a wave of enthusiasm. The most important lesson from 1997 was that dissatisfaction with the right-wing Government and President remained a key-factor to the understanding of the victory of the left-wing coalition. According to a poll-survey carried out in April 1997, 75 per cent of the French thought that President Chirac did not keep his electoral promises. As a consequence of this broad public discontent, the Right lost a significant part of its electoral support: 12 per cent of those who voted for Chirac at the second ballot of the 1995 presidential election voted for a left-wing candidate in 1997 whilst 20 per cent of the disillusioned voters protested by supporting the Front national. Meanwhile, the Left managed to secured votes from 90 per cent of those who voted for Jospin in 1995.

Flow of the Vote (1995-1997)

Vote	Vote 1997 (1st Round)			Vote	Vote 1997 (1st Round)		
	LEFT	RIGHT	FN		LEFT	RIGHT	FN
1995 (1)				1995 (2)			
Laguiller	94	3	3	Jospin	90	3	7
Hue	97	0	3	Chirac	12	68	20
Jospin	93	3	4				
Voynet	89	11	0				
Chirac	13	74	13				
Balladur	8	77	15				
De Villiers	9	67	24				
Le Pen	9	6	85				

Survey - SOFRES / CEVIPOF 1997

Note : Recalled votes in 1995 (Presidential Election) as reported after 1997 election.
 Left+Ecologist (1997) = Extreme-Left + PC + PS + Other Left + Ecologists. Right
 (1997) = RPR + UDF + Other Right.

In 1997, the predominant traditional Right appeared to be the main loser. The score of the RPR-UDF and their allies fell down to the record minimum of 33.4 per cent of the valid votes cast (+ 2.8 per cent won by La Droite Indépendante). The PS and the Radicals achieved 25.5 per cent of the poll : with the PC (9.9 per cent), the Mouvement des Citoyens (1.05 per cent), the Greens (3.5 per cent) and the various 'other Left' candidates, the Socialist-led alliance secured 42.1 per cent of the votes and captured 319 seats after the second round. The FN first-ballot score of 14.9 per cent

was 2.5 points higher than in 1993 and denoted a significant increase in electoral support for the far-right.

The 1997 Legislative Election in France - 1st Round - 25 May 1997

Left		Right		Others	
Ext. Left	2.18	RPR	16.81	Other Ecol.	2.68
PS/PRS	25.50	UDF	14.70	Others	1.79
PC	9.91	LDI	2.80		
Greens	3.59	Other Right	1.85		
MDC	1.05	FN	14.94		
Other Left	2.05	Ext. Right	0.15		

Note: Figures are for the whole of France (including the overseas territories). Detail: Génération Ecologie (1.72 per cent), Mouvement Ecologiste Indépendant (MEI, 0.73 per cent), Convention pour une Alternative progressiste (CAP) + Alternative Rouge et Verte (AREV) 0.29 per cent, Lutte Ouvrière (1.67 per cent).

Both electoral instability and political fragmentation can be seen as clear signs of major transformations in the party system. Therefore, the question to be addressed is which are the significant changes in the structure and dynamics of French politics? The paper's aim is to examine some of those gradual changes over time, the main hypothesis being that the party system is moving from the traditional bipolar format (*quadrille bipolaire*) - that has shaped and stabilised French party politics since the mid 1970s - to an underlying two-and-a-half system characterised by a tripolar structure: the Left (dominant Socialist party, declining PC and minor ecologist parties which have not achieved political relevance on their own), a relatively stable liberal-conservative alliance on the right side of the political spectrum and the Front national as a separate third block.

That the French party system is still in transition can be illustrated by considering various indicators of the weakening of the two tendencies politics. Meanwhile, the cleavage between the Left and the Right still partly shapes electoral behaviour and the old dualistic forms of political mobilisation do not appear to be totally losing their potency. This inertia makes difficult any attempt at classification and probably explains why the underlying two-and-a-half system has not emerged yet. However, it can be argued that the apparent stability of the bipolar format of French party politics relies largely upon the nature of the electoral system. Over the last decades, the two-ballot majority system has played a great role in structuring electoral behaviour on a bipolar basis.

The bipolarising impact of the electoral system is evident from the flows of the vote between the two rounds of presidential elections. Direct

switching between the Left and the Right - as estimated from the poll-surveys - has always been rare. In 1988, only 7 per cent of the voters actually switched from one camp to another between the two rounds of the presidential contest. Level of vote switching is similar for the 1995 election with a total inter-block swing of 10 per cent. Under other electoral circumstances, figures prove to be slightly higher: inter-block[2] volatility can be estimated at about 13 per cent of the voters between the 1984 European election and the 1986 parliamentary election. Between March 1986 and April 1988, 12 per cent of the voters swung from a block to another. They were 12.5 per cent between 1993 and 1995, and 11.5 per cent between the second round of the 1995 presidential election and the first ballot of the 1997 legislative contest.

A more instructive calculation can be made by assuming that the Front national represents a third political component on its own. In this perspective, inter-block[3] volatility increases to 19 per cent of the voters between 1993 and 1995; the figure is 16 per cent between the first round of the 1995 presidential election and the first ballot of the 1997 contest.

Dimensions of Party System Change

Let us consider first some evidence of relevant changes in the French party system. The main features of the contemporary party system include: 1/ a crisis of political representation revealed by a significant decrease in turnout rates / increase in the number of spoiled votes and a broad feeling of distrust towards the traditional 'political class'; 2/ a decline of mainstream parties in office and in the opposition ; 3/ fragmentation of party politics and the rise of new fringe parties outside the mainstream. In this section we examine all these elements in turn.

The crisis of political representation

There is some evidence regarding the crisis of traditional political representation in France and the general malaise towards politics. Changes are first at the level of lower turn-out and the development of the 'non-voters party'. Figures offer evidence of disenchantment. The proportion of French voters turning out in Parliamentary elections has been decreasing over the past decade by about 10 points.

The downward trend in turnout has begun in the late 1980s. Since 1988, average abstention levels in legislative elections have been rising to about one third in average of the eligible people (34.26 per cent in 1988, 31.08 per cent in 1993 and 32.04 per cent in 1997). In the 1970s, the average percentage of abstention was below 20 per cent (18.8 per cent in 1967, 20 per cent in 1968, 18.7 per cent in 1973 and 16.7 per cent in 1978). A similar conclusion applies to presidential elections although turn-out levels remain higher: in 1995, abstention increased to 21.6 per cent compared to 18.6, 18.9 et 15.7 per cent in 1988, 1981 and 1974.

Abstention in France (First Rounds 1978-1997)

	Legislative Elections					
	1978	1981	1986	1988	1993	1997
Spoiled Papers	1,62	1,01	3,40	1,35	3,64	4,94
Abstention	16,75	29,14	21,51	34,26	31,08	32,04

	Presidential Elections		
	1981	1988	1995
Spoiled Papers	1,31	1,60	2,21
Abstention	18,91	18,62	21,62

Figures are for the whole of France (including the overseas territories).

Meanwhile, we note a substantial increase in the number of spoiled papers. A small but nonetheless increasing proportion of French voters are now expressing their rejection of parties of the left and the right. In the 1990s, the proportion of voters choosing to spoil their votes is significantly higher: in 1997, 1,315,379 voters did so (4.94 per cent of the total of votes opposed to 1.62 per cent in 1978 or 1.01 per cent in 1981 ; the figure was 6 per cent at the second round of the 1995 presidential election).

Similarly, the percentage of people over 18 year-old who do not register on electoral lists has risen from 3.5 per cent in 1981 to 7 per cent in 1995. At the last presidential election, the proportion of French citizens showing their disaffection with the political system can be estimated at about 30 per cent of the whole of the potential eligible population (people not registered to vote + abstention + spoiled papers) (Le Gall, 1995, p.27).

Since the mid 1980s, popular disenchantment and distrust of the 'political establishment' are even more evident from opinion surveys in France. In 1991, only 29 per cent of the respondents tend to agree that politicians are interested in their problems (compared with 53 per cent in 1977 and 45 per cent in 1983). Undoubtedly, publicisation of political

scandals has undermined public respect for politicians and fed the popular feeling that political parties are predominantly self-interested and inward looking. In 1995, 62 per cent of the French agree that political leaders are corrupted (opposed to 38 per cent in 1977 and 55 per cent in 1990).

Decline of the mainstream parties

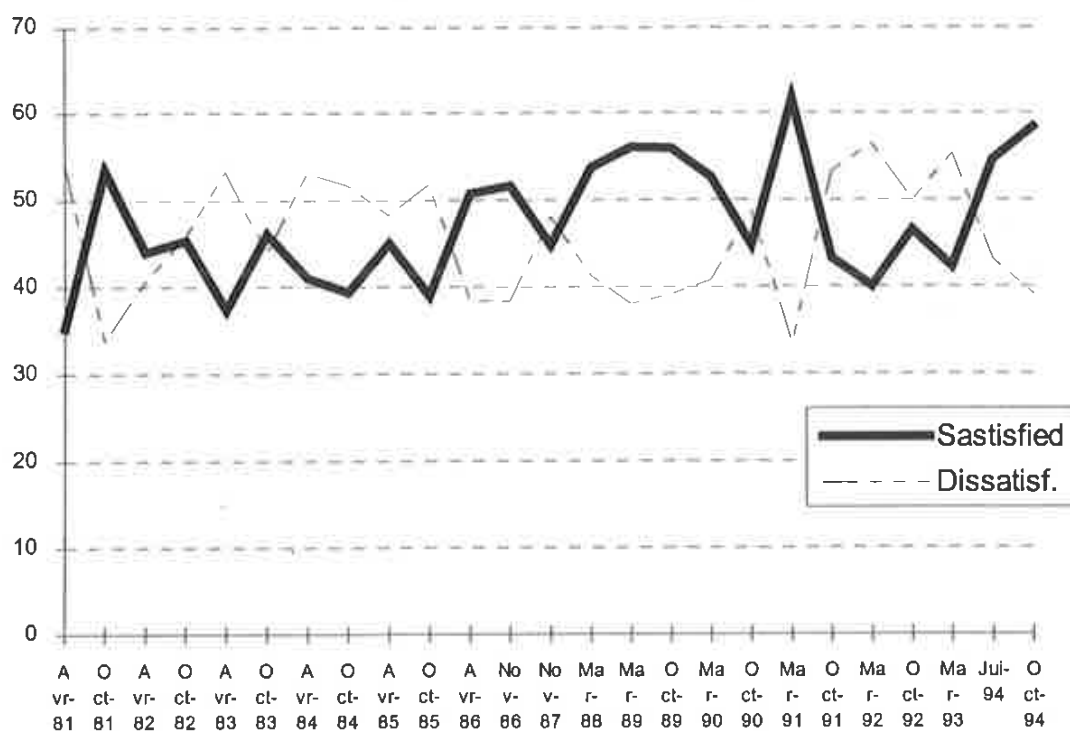
Results of elections at both local and national levels show that voters are more likely to blame the party in office and remove it from power. This was obvious from the 1986, 1993 and 1997 legislative elections, when the balance of forces shifted from a camp to another and led to political alternation. Mid-term elections such as the 1989 and 1994 European elections or local elections such as the 1983 / 1989 municipal elections or the 1992 regional contest fit into a category of protest vote. In those elections national issues interfered with other types of concerns and voters expressed their dissatisfaction with the incumbent governments and their policies.

These observations support the argument of a greater voter willingness to decide on the basis of performance evaluation. Distrust and dissatisfaction are mainly associated with economic recession and the apparent lack of policy responsiveness from the mainstream parties when it comes to the salient issue of unemployment. Neither the socialist Left nor the conservative Right have managed to satisfy the basic expectations of the citizens. This perceived inability of policy-makers to respond to public demand has probably contributed to increase the confidence gap and to weaken elite-mass linkages. French voters seem to be rather doubtful whether one party can do better than the other: for instance, according to SOFRES, in 1997, 37 per cent of the voters thought that both the Left and the Right were not competent to manage the country's affairs (CEVIPOF / SOFRES, 1997).

On the other hand, the crisis of representative government in France does not on the whole concern the legitimacy of the regime itself. There is very little evidence of a spill-over process that would lead to the rejection of fundamental democratic values. Trends in satisfaction with democracy - as measured from Eurobarometer data - do not show any clear downward tendency over the 1981-1994 period of time. The balance between satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels rather reflects changes in the French political agenda, pragmatic dissatisfaction within the public opinion and the closeness to key-elections.

On the whole the picture is: the proportion of those satisfied with the way democracy works in France increases just after the date of a national election and then start to decline. Satisfaction thus grows in the aftermath of the 1981 presidential / legislative elections before dropping down in the 1982-1983 period of unpopular socialist government and the municipal elections of 1983 where the Left suffers important losses. Dissatisfaction remains stable at a high level over the 1983-1986 period: we observe a substantial drop of those dissatisfied around the 1986 general election and the first *cohabitation*. People with positive opinion about democracy functioning increase appreciably in percentage after the 1988 presidential election before falling again in the early 1990s. The sudden rise of satisfaction levels in March 1991 might probably be understood as an effect of the short period of 'national solidarity' during the Gulf War. But the proportion of satisfied people remains stable at a low level all over the years 1991-1992. Conversely, figures show a significant growth in the number of satisfied from the 1993 election onward.

Satisfaction with Democracy in France (1981-1994) - Eurobarometers



Moreover, the crisis of mainstream parties is obvious in the fragmentation of French politics since the early 1990s. Significant decline in the shares of

the vote secured by parties of government (PS / RPR and UDF) are other indicators of the reshaping of national party system. Not only incumbent governments but all the parties, government and opposition alike, have suffered losses in recent elections.

In the 1980s, the three major parties were totalling over 70 per cent of the total vote in parliamentary elections (77.52 per cent in 1981, 73.09 per cent in 1986 and 75.2 per cent in 1988). The comparable figures dropped down to 55.87 and 57 per cent at the 1993 and 1997 legislative contests. In the regional election of March 1992, the PS, RPR and UDF together won only 49 per cent of the polls. This continuing tendency to fragmentation in the party system is acknowledged by the results of presidential elections: in 1995, the share of the vote obtained by the parties of government fell to 62.72 per cent of the total vote opposed to 72.17 per cent in 1981 and 70.58 per cent in 1988.

Shares of the vote in France (First Rounds 1978-1997)

	Legislative Elections					
	1978	1981	1986	1988	1993	1997
PC	20,56	16,21	9,40	11,32	9,18	9,91
PS+MRG	24,69	37,52	31,84	37,52	17,39	25,49
UDF	21,46	19,20		18,50	18,64	14,70
RPR	22,62	20,80	41,25	19,18	19,84	16,81
Total	68,77	77,52	73,09	75,20	55,87	57,00
Other Left		0,73	1,04		2,75	3,12
Other Right	2,40	2,81	3,93	2,86	5,64	4,64
FN+Extr.Right		0,28	9,82	9,80	12,56	15,09
Greens	2,15	1,10	1,21	0,37	10,70	3,59
Extr.Left	3,34	1,35	1,41	0,36	1,67	2,18
Others	2,78		0,10	0,09	1,63	4,47

	Presidential Elections		
	1981	1988	1995
PC	15,35	6,76	8,64
PS+MRG	25,85	34,10	23,30
UDF	28,32	16,54	18,58
RPR	18,00	19,94	20,84
Total	72,17	70,58	62,72
Other Left	3,31	2,01	
Other Right	2,99		4,74

FN+Extr.Right		14,40	15,00
Greens	3,88	3,78	3,32
Extr.Left	2,30	2,47	5,30
Others			0,28

Note: Figures are for the whole of France (including the overseas territories); percentages of valid votes.

1997: PS+Parti Radical-Socialiste, MDC with other Left; Various Right-wing candidates + LDI; Various ecologists regrouped within the 'Others' category.

Fragmentation in the party system

From an overall perspective, the increase in the average number of individual candidates per constituency shows clear signs of fragmentation in French party politics¹. In the 1981 contest, the average number of candidates per constituency was 5.38. Comparable figure dropped down to 4.96 in 1988.

¹ Other interesting features of change in the party system include intra-block competition and party factionalism. Most of the traditional parties are faced with real tensions over personalities, policies or politics. On the left, the Socialist party suffered from bitter intra-party factionalism, as revealed by the party conference held in Rennes in 1990 and the battle for taking over party leadership. Disagreement on the Maastricht Treaty led to the split of the opponents to European integration and the creation of the Mouvement des Citoyens by Chevènement. Since the late 1980s, the PC has been faced with the movement of *renovateurs* contesting the party ideological orthodoxy. In 1997, PC representatives had to compete against 100 candidates fielded by the former communists of the CAP (Convention pour une alternative progressiste) allied with the AREV (Alternative rouge et verte). Divisions within the Green movement are even more obvious: in 1992-1993, its two major components - namely Génération Ecologie and Les Verts - managed to build a façade of unity for the regional / legislative elections, but disagreement remained about party strategy and the alliance with the mainstream parties. On the right side of the political spectrum, the RPR-UDF coalition as a whole, and each of its constituent parts, appeared far from united in the late 1980s and early 1990s when dissident voices were raised in public. Divisions emerged in 1986 with the campaign of the young *quadra*-generation to renovate the RPR and renew the leadership. At the 1990 party conference held in Le Bourget, the lack of cohesion was underlined by the Pasqua-Séguin takeover against party policies and politics. In the aftermath of the 1992 referendum on Maastricht, the UDF was faced with the split of de Villiers and the creation of the Mouvement pour la France by de Villiers. In the aftermath of the 1997 electoral defeat, antagonist factions re-emerged within the RPR national leadership. On the far-right, the Front national was faced twice with the presence of the Alliance populaire / Parti national Républicain dissident candidates: in 1993 and 1997, Touzé's party fielded 78 and 79 candidates.

The situation in 1993 and 1997 elections differed significantly: in the first round of the 1993 parliamentary election, the number of candidates taking part in the contest grew to 9.26 in average (total of 5,139 candidates in metropolitan France with a record number of 1,300 ecologists).

This proportion has risen to the record average number of 11.22 in the last 1997 general election, with a total number of 6,225 candidates in the 555 metropolitan constituencies. The increase in the total number of candidates might partly be understood as an effect of the state funding system introduced in 1990. The actual public subsidy system provides funds on a *per capita* basis - about eleven French Francs per vote, provided that the party has fielded at least 50 candidates in the election - and thus undoubtedly produces incentives for minor parties to take part in the contest.

Candidates per Constituency - Legislative Elections 1981-1997

Legislative Election 1981			Legislative Election 1988		
1st Round - 14 June 1981			1st Round - 5 June 1988		
Candidates / Constituency			Candidates / Constituency		
	N	%		N	%
3	55	11.6	3	2	0.3
4	129	27.2	4	239	43.1
5	98	20.7	5	179	32.3
6	84	17.7	6	84	15.1
7	45	9.5	7	32	5.8
8	31	6.5	8 and +	19	3.4
9	16	3.4			
10 and +	16	3.4			

Statistics

Total	2,552	Total	2,755
Mean	5.38	Mean	4.96
Variance	3.38	Variance	1.40
(N)	474	(N)	555

Legislative Election 1993			Legislative Election 1997		
1st Round - 21 March 1993			1st Round - 25 May 1997		
Candidates / Constituency			Candidates / Constituency		
	N	%		N	%
5	4	0.7	4	1	0.2
6	33	5.8	5	4	0.7
7	80	14.4	6	18	3.2
8	129	23.2	7	43	7.7
9	99	17.8	8	57	10.3
10	61	11.0	9	81	14.6
11	55	9.9	10	65	11.7
12	41	7.4	11	61	11.0

13	30	5.4	12	47	8.5
14 and +	23	4.1	13	48	8.6
			14	41	7.4
			15	35	6.3
			16 and +	54	9.7

Statistics					
Total	5.139	Total	6.225		
Mean	9.26	Mean	11.22		
Variance	4.90	Variance	12.43		
(N)	555	(N)	555		

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France.

On a departmental basis, figures for elections under proportional electoral system show similar trends. At the 1986 legislative election, the average number of lists per department was 8.03. At the regional election held simultaneously, 6.91 lists in average were contesting the polls. The average number of lists rose to 7.95 per department at the 1992 regional election.

Lists per Department - 1986 Legislative Election, 1986 and 1992 Regional Elections

Legislative Election 1986			Regional Election 1986		
16 March 1986			16 March 1986		
Lists / Department			Lists / Department		
	N	%		N	%
5	9	9.4	4	7	7.3
6	20	20.7	5	19	19.8
7	18	18.8	6	18	18.7
8	17	17.7	7	13	13.5
9	11	11.5	8	23	24.0
10 and +	21	21.9	9 and +	16	16.7

Statistics					
Total	771	Total	663		
Mean	8.03	Mean	6.91		
Variance	5.59	Variance	3.37		
(N)	96	(N)	96		

Regional Election 1992		
22 March 1992		
Lists / Department		
	N	%
5	3	3.2
6	5	5.3
7	25	26.6
8	31	33.0
9	21	22.3
10	9	9.6

Statistics	
Total	747
Mean	7.95
Variance	1.38
(N)	94

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. No regional election in Corsica in 1992.

Not only is fragmentation obvious from the number of candidates per constituency, it is also evident from the increase in the number of relevant candidates in first rounds of parliamentary elections and the changing distribution of contest types at constituency level. If we take here as a crude criterion of relevance the winning of at least 5 per cent of the vote - which represents a traditional institutional threshold -, there are significant changes over the 1981-1997 period of time. In 1981, the average number of relevant candidates per constituency was 3.21. The PS, PC and UDF / RPR were the main protagonists in more than two-thirds of the constituencies (67.1 per cent).

By 1986, the general tripolar format of the contest was disturbed by the introduction of the proportional electoral law and the rise of the Front national. The extreme-right became the principal opponent to the traditional political forces: the average number of relevant candidates thus rose from about 3 to 4.44. Although the majority system was reintroduced for the 1988 election, figures proved to be quite similar with an average of 3.9 per constituency.

Relevant Candidates per Constituency (1981-1997)

Legislative Election 1981			Legislative Election 1986			Legislative Election 1988		
1st Round - 14 June 1981			16 March 1986			1st Round - 5 June 1988		
Relevant / Constituency			Relevant / Constituency			Relevant / Constituency		
	N	%		N	%		N	%
2	30	6.3	2	8	1.4	2	15	2.7
3	318	67.1	3	57	10.3	3	94	16.9
4	122	25.7	4	218	39.3	4	384	69.2
5	4	0.8	5	229	41.3	5	54	9.7
			6	41	7.4	6	8	1.4
			7	2	0.4			
Statistics								
Total	1522		Total	2464		Total	2166	
Mean	3.21		Mean	4.44		Mean	3.90	
Var	0.31		Var	0.71		Var	0.42	
(N)	474		(N)	555		(N)	555	

Legislative Election 1993			Legislative Election 1997		
1st Round - 21 March 1993			1st Round - 25 May 1997		
Relevant / Constituency			Relevant / Constituency		
	N	%		N	%
3	4	0.7	3	29	5.2
4	78	14.1	4	333	60.0
5	265	47.7	5	159	28.6
6	174	31.4	6	31	5.6
7	30	5.4	7	3	0.6
8	4	0.7			
Statistics					
Total	2931		Total	2421	
Mean	5.29		Mean	4.36	
Variance	0.68		Variance	0.48	
(N)	555		(N)	555	

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France.
Relevance = 5 % of the valid votes cast.

Major changes in the distribution of contest types occurred at the first round of the 1993 election with an average number of relevant candidates of 5.29. In almost a half of the metropolitan constituencies (47.7 per cent), five parties achieved political relevance. The number of parties that obtained at least 5 per cent of the polls even increased to six in 31.4 per cent of the constituencies. At the general election of March 1993, most of the cases were characterised by a pentagonal contest type (PS-PC-Right-FN-Ecologist). On a departmental basis, it is worth noting that the average number of relevant lists in the regional election of March 1992 was 6.39. Similarly, distribution of votes among the candidates at the first ballot of the 1995 presidential election showed an average of 5.98 candidates achieving political relevance.

In contrast, figures for the 1997 showed a reshaping of the party system at constituency level with an average number of relevant candidates dropping down to 4.36 and a PC-Left-Right-FN format in 60 per cent of the cases.

*Relevant Candidates per Department: 1992 Regional and
1995 Presidential Elections*

Regional Election 1992	Presidential Election 1995
22 March 1992	23 April 1995

Relevant Candidates / Department			Relevant Candidates / Department		
	N	%		N	%
4	3	3.2	3	1	1.0
5	14	14.9	4	2	2.1
6	30	31.9	5	21	21.9
7	37	39.4	6	47	49.0
8	10	10.6	7	24	25.0
			8	1	1.0
Statistics					
Mean	6.39		Mean	5.98	
Variance	0.95		Variance	0.69	
(N)	94		(N)	96	

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France.
Relevance = 5 per cent of the valid votes cast.

Another interesting feature of fragmentation in French politics is the declining number of candidates elected in the first round of parliamentary elections. In 1981, 156 candidates won their parliamentary seat with an overall majority of the vote in the first round. At the 1988 election, 123 MPs were elected in the first round. The number of first-ballot elected candidates dropped down to 80 in March 1993. In 1997, only 12 candidates obtained their seat without contesting the second round.

The Underlying Two-and-a-Half Party System

This section aims to look more closely at the actual shape of the party system which, according to our previous hypothesis, includes the main features of a two-and-a-half format. Significant indicators are at level of the respective electoral strength of those parties that remain outside the mainstream.

When arguing that the French party system is best described as a particular type of two-and-a-half party system, two further points should be made. First, one has to look at changes in the patterns of party competition and co-operation. Second, it is worth paying attention to the constraint imposed by the majority electoral system and asking what would have been the figures if a proportional representation system had been in place ?

Electoral strength of fringe parties

A first way of looking at changes in the structure of the party system can be to consider the relative electoral strength of the fringe parties and the number of their relevant candidates in first rounds of parliamentary elections.

Figures show a significant decline of the Communist Party over the 1981-1997 period. In 1981, the PC candidates achieved political relevance in 89 per cent of the metropolitan constituencies. In the first round of the 1993 election, the proportion fell down to 78.4 per cent. In practice, the party disappeared from many parts of the country and its electoral influence was restricted to a little number of the historic Red strongholds. At the 1992 regional election, the PC decline was even more obvious: on a departmental basis, only 76.6 per cent of the Communist lists achieved a 5 per cent threshold. In 1997, PC representatives were relevant in 81.6 per cent of the constituencies.

In spite of its performance in the first round of the 1995 presidential election, the extreme-left remains completely marginal to French politics: in 1993, the various components of the far-left achieved political relevance in only 4.9 per cent of the constituencies. A similar conclusion applies to the minor regionalist parties. In 1993, they obtained over 5 per cent of the valid votes cast in only 2.2 per cent of the constituencies.

Political Relevance of Minor Parties (1981-1997)

Legislative Election 1981				
1st Round - 14 June 1981				
	Candidates		> 5 %	
	N	%	N	%
PC	474	100	422	89.0
Extr-Left	281	59.3	3	0.6
FN	67	14.1	0	0.0
PFN	47	9.9	1	0.2
Extr-Right	9	1.9	2	0.4
Greens	153	32.3	9	1.9
Regional	22	4.6	0	0.0
(N)	474			

Legislative Election 1988				
1st Round - 5 June 1988				
	Candidates		> 5 %	
	N	%	N	%
PC	555	100	457	82.3
Extr-Left	85	15.3	7	1.3
FN	548	98.7	495	89.2
Extr-Right	93	16.8	1	0.2
Greens	54	9.7	15	2.7
Regional	11	2.0	4	0.7
(N)	555			

Legislative Election 1993				
1st Round - 21 March 1993				
	Candidates		> 5 %	
	N	%	N	%
PC	555	100	435	78.4
Extr-Left	324	58.5	27	4.9
FN	554	99.9	543	97.9
Extr-Right	127	22.9	1	0.2
GE	261	47.0	246	44.4
Greens	287	51.9	254	45.7
Others	532	95.9	98	17.7
Regional	41	7.4	12	2.2
(N)	555			

Legislative Election 1997				
1st Round - 25 May 1997				
	Candidates		> 5 %	
	N	%	N	%
PC	533	96.0	453	81.6
MDC	164	29.5	23	4.1
FN	555	100	554	99.8
PRS	42	7.6	34	6.1
GE	374	67.4	10	1.8
Greens	409	73.7	103	18.6
LDI	499	89.9	38	6.8
MEI	244	44.0	4	0.7
EC	107	19.2	13	2.3
(N)	555			

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France.

In the 1980s, the Green movement remained electorally irrelevant in most of the cases: in 1988, only 2.7 per cent of the ecologist candidates gained over 5 per cent of the poll. At the 1986 regional election, the Greens did not

performed very well and won only 3 seats of regional councillors out of a total of 1,682.

The Greens made their first impressive breakthrough in the 1992 regional election: on a departmental basis, Génération Ecologie achieved political relevance in 77.6 per cent of the cases whilst the Greens' score was over 5 per cent in 86.1 per cent of the metropolitan departments. Both parties significantly increased their number of seats in regional councils (GE gained 109 seats; the Greens managed to capture 104).

In the first round of the 1993 general election, the ecologist candidates were electorally relevant in 90 per cent of the constituencies. In 1997, however, figures dramatically dropped down to 18.6 per cent for the Greens and 1.8 per cent for Génération Ecologie. Contesting on their own, the MEI and EC achieved the 5 per cent threshold of relevance in respectively 0.7 per cent and 2.3 per cent of the constituencies. There is no doubt that division within the ecologist camp is the key-explanation to this dramatic decrease: all together, the ecologists would have achieved political relevance in 67.4 per cent of the metropolitan constituencies.

Political Relevance of Minor Parties (1986-1992)

Legislative Election 1986				
16 March 1993				
	Lists / Department		> 5 % / Constit.	
	N	%	N	%
PC	96	100	435	78.4
Extr-Left	94	97.9	2	0.4
FN	96	100	503	90.6
Greens	30	31.3	1	0.2
Regional	5	5.2	4	0.7
(N)	96		(N)	555

Regional Election 1992				
22 March 1992				
	Lists / Department		> 5 % / Department	
	N	%	N	%
PC	94	100	72	76.6
Extr-Left	37	39.3	6	6.4
FN	94	100	94	100
Extr-Right	4	4.2	2	2.1
GE	78	82.9	73	77.6
Greens	94	100	81	86.1
Regional	16	17.0	0	0

Others	51	54.2	38	40.4
(N)	94		94	

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. At the 1986 regional election, the Greens stood in 48 departments (50 per cent). The Front national fielded candidates in all but one department (Haute-Corse).

Figures are very different when it comes to the case of the Front national. The FN was largely irrelevant in 1981. In a five-year time, the Front national managed to establish a solid electoral base in most parts of France. The lists presented by the far right in the 1986 legislative election thus won over 5 per cent of the poll in 90.6 per cent of the metropolitan constituencies. At the 1988 legislative election, Le Pen's party achieved political relevance in 89.2 per cent of the cases. In 1993 and 1997, the percentage of constituencies in which the FN obtained over 5 per cent of the vote increased to 97.9 per cent and 99.8 per cent. In the first round of the 1997 election, the FN candidates achieved a 10 per cent threshold in over 80 per cent of the constituencies and contested the second round in 132 cases (compared with 100 in 1993).

Since the late 1980s, the far right has significantly enlarged its political base throughout the country. At the regional election of March 1992, the FN representatives were electorally relevant in all the metropolitan departments and the party won 241 seats of regional councillors (compared with 131 in 1986). In the 1994 cantonal elections, the Front national managed to run candidates in 1,848 of the 1,922 cantons in which contests were taking place.

Party competition and co-operation

The transformation of the French party system can be seen from the changes in patterns of competition and co-operation. Although most of the traditional parties are faced with party factionalism and real tensions over personalities, policies or politics, they appear to be unified for tactical purposes and manage to prevent too many defections by leaders of particular factions.

There are a large number of incentives for parties to co-operate electorally in spite of bitter intra-block competition. It seems obvious from

the 1997 legislative election that significant changes have occurred in the forms of co-operative behaviour between the parties. In terms of the electoral alliances the 1997 party system was clearly falling in the two-and-a-half party system category.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the PS managed to develop a broad electoral coalition to maximise the appeal of the whole of the Left in the electorate. In April 1997, the Socialists reached an agreement with the PC. The latter found in this partnership the only opportunity to secure its parliamentary group and avoid losing part of the public funding provided by its MPs. The Socialist-led left-wing coalition embraced the Communists, Chevènement's Mouvement des Citoyens and the traditional Radical allies (PRS).

Unlike what happened in 1993, the various constituent parts of the Green movement did not reach mutual agreement for the 1997 general election. Voynet's Verts moved into the left-wing coalition pact and fielded candidates in 409 constituencies (29 of them being supported by the Socialist party). Génération Ecologie's representatives campaigned individually and stood on their own in 374 metropolitan constituencies. Other ecologists took part in the first round: Ecologie citoyenne - the alliance of Mamère's Convergence écologie solidarité (CES) and Piétransanta's Parti écologiste (PE) - fielded 155 candidates together with regionalists. Waechter's MEI ran 244 individual candidates.

On the right wing, the alliance between the RPR and the UDF has been a characteristic feature of party strategy since the late 1970s. From the 1978 election onward, the orthodox Right has presented a common first-ballot candidate in 72 per cent in average of the constituencies. In the first round of the 1993 legislative election, the RPR-UDF alliance was running a single candidate in 84.8 per cent of the metropolitan constituencies.

In 1997, the RPR and the UDF officially contested election against each other in only 8 constituencies. The representatives of the coalition were faced with the presence of dissident candidates in about 70 constituencies. Figures were similar at the first ballot of the 1993 election: the RPR and the UDF competed against each other in 85 constituencies. In 1981, the number of first-ballot contests between the two parties of the right-wing coalition was 116. Thus, in spite of the many tensions, the RPR-UDF coalition has managed to build a semblance of unity in most of the electoral contests. In the 1986 election, the RPR and the UDF presented 62 common lists.

Only attitudes towards European integration and disagreements about the Maastricht Treaty pushed party leaders into open conflict and led

to the creation of a new challenger on the right: the Mouvement pour la France founded by de Villiers. In the 1997 election, La Droite Indépendante (alliance between the MPF and the CNIP) fielded a total of 520 candidates in 499 constituencies.

A consequence of this increasing coherence and homogeneity of the right-wing alliance has been to push back the Front national towards the extreme-right fringe of the political spectrum, as the Liberal component of the Right refused any link with Le Pen's party. Changes in the arena of competition and co-operation between the RPR-UDF and the FN clearly show that the FN is now a separate third block in the party system.

By the mid-1990s, any formal link between the mainstream Right and the Front national has become less likely. Faced with its political isolation and its inability to establish tactical contacts with the Right, the FN has stressed its new majority vocation as a third way between the Left and the Right. This significantly changed the focus of competition at elections: since the 1995 presidential election and Le Pen's virulent attacks on Chirac, the Front national strategy has been primarily directed against the RPR-UDF alliance. In the second ballot of the 1997 election, the FN candidates therefore stood in 76 three-block contests.

Together with changes in party strategy, some relevant changes occurred in the nature of the FN electoral support. Not only is the increasing electoral strength of the far right evident from the performances of the FN in elections, it also obvious from the transformation of its electorate. By the mid-1990s, the FN is institutionalised within French politics. The party has managed to secure its own political space in the political system.

The contemporary FN's electorate appears to have a higher degree of identification with the party. According to a poll-survey carried out in 1997, 58 per cent of the FN voters stated a strong or fairly strong identification with Le Pen's party (as opposed to an average of 35 per cent in the 1988 and 1995 presidential contests). Voting for the National Front tends now to be permanent and less volatile, since Le Pen's voters not only want to protest against the system and the established parties, as they did in the mid-1980s, but display a strong commitment to the FN. In 1995, 60 per cent of those who voted for Le Pen totally agreed with the nationalist-populist political agenda of the far right.

There is now a permanent and stable far right electorate with a high level of voting loyalty: 75 per cent of those who voted for Le Pen in

1988 and 80 per cent of those who voted for a far-right candidate in 1993 voted for the FN at the first ballot of the 1995 presidential election. Between 1995 and 1997, the Front national secured 85 per cent of its electoral support. Moreover, far right voters seem to be less likely to switch to the mainstream Right. In 1988, 65 per cent of Le Pen's first-ballot voters voted for Chirac whereas 19 per cent voted for Mitterrand. Between the two rounds of the 1995 contest, only 51 per cent of the far right voters switched to Chirac whilst 28 per cent voted for Jospin and 21 per cent did not vote.

Figures are very similar from the 1997 contest: among those who voted for a FN candidate at the first ballot of the legislative election, only 49 per cent voted for a right-wing candidate in the second round; 22 per cent voted for a left-wing representative and 29 per cent did not turn out (CEVIPOF / SOFRES).

Changes in patterns of co-operation and competition between the parties play a great role in the reshaping of the party system. The structure that emerged from the 1997 contest clearly fit into the two-and-a-half type of system in spite of the apparent bipolarisation between the two major coalition blocks of the Left and the Right.

The French party system under proportional electoral system

France's majority two-ballot system is not neutral. As in many other Western democracies, the electoral system is not a mere detail but a key causal factor. To a large extent, political stability can be seen as a consequence of the constraints imposed by the electoral law. Both party strategy and voting behaviour are partly dictated by the dynamics of the two-ballot single member-constituency system. The French electoral system rewards traditional parties which are well entrenched at constituency level. This is more than evident from the ability of the Communist Party to secure its parliamentary group in spite of its electoral decline. The current system leads to an over-representation of those parties in Parliament and largely inhibits the development of new parties. Although for instance they won over a fifth of the vote in 1993, both the ecologists and the far right had no representatives elected in Parliament.

Actual Distribution of Parliamentary Seats under majority system (1981-1997)

	Actual Number of Seats won by Parties in Legislative Elections					
	1981		1986*		1988	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
PC	44	8,9	35	6,1	25	4,3
PS+MRG	285	58,0	212	36,7	275	47,7
UDF	62	12,6	131	22,7	90	15,6
RPR	88	17,9	155	26,9	132	22,9
Other	12	2,6	9	1,5	55	9,5
FN+Extr.r	0	0	35	6,1	0	0
Greens	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	491	100	577	100	577	100

Actual Number of Seats won by Parties in Legislative Elections				
	1993		1997	
	N	%	N	%
PC	23	3,6	37	6,5
PS+MRG	57	10,0	265	45,9
UDF	215	37,4	109	18,9
RPR	257	44,6	140	24,3
Other	25	4,4	17	2,9
FN+Extr.r	0	0	1	0,1
Greens	0	0	8	1,4
TOTAL	577	100	577	100

Note : Figures are for the whole of France. 1986 : system of proportional representation. 1997 : PS+PRS+MDC ; Others = Other Left + Other Right + LDI. Detail 1997: PC (37), MDC (7), PS (245), PRS (13), Greens (8), Other Left (9), Various Right-wing (7), UDF (109), RPR (140), LDI (1), FN (1).

The distortive impact of the electoral system can be seen from the actual distribution of seats in the Assembly between 1981 and 1997. Over the period of time, the parties of government have managed to secure over 85 per cent of the parliamentary seats at each election. Analysis of seats:votes ratios shows how the electoral system benefits major parties. In 1997, the PS, RPR and UDF obtained 90 per cent of the legislative seats with 57 per cent of the total votes cast (1.58). The ratio was slightly higher in 1993 with a total of 92 per cent of the seats with only 56 per cent of the polls (1.64).

The majority system does not only protect the mainstream parties from the loss of a significant part of their parliamentary representation but it also does cancel the effects of party fragmentation.

In seeking an understanding of how fragmentation in party politics can affect the whole structure of the system, it is tempting to look at the

possible political configurations that could emerge from an alternative electoral system.

In France, the question of what the successive legislatures would have been if the parliamentary elections had been held under a proportional representation system is of considerable interest. Our concern is not with the merits or the disadvantages of proportional representation. PR simulations as they can be calculated from the actual shares of the vote at constituency level help to take into account both the level of fragmentation in the system and the relative electoral strength of the parties that contest the election. In that sense, they provide a more accurate picture of the underlying structure of the party system. It is of course an hypothetical question and it cannot be assumed that voters would act the same way under a different system. Similarly, it is very likely that the introduction of a PR system would substantially modify the actual patterns of competition and co-operation between the parties.

On the assumption that the PR system would induce changes in party behaviour - and consequently in levels of party fragmentation -, the expected distribution of seats at each election is estimated for various hypothetical scenario. PFM (*plus forte moyenne*) columns in the following tables report the number of seats that each party would have won under the PR department-list system that was introduced in the 1986 legislative election.

The results suggest that:

1. the number of seats obtained by the mainstream parties tend to decline when the level of fragmentation in the system increases. In 1997, for instance, the three major parties all together (PS, RPR and UDF) would have secured 425 of the 555 metropolitan seats without their allies (hypothesis # 1 of high fragmentation) compared with 442 when including their various coalition partners (hypothesis # 3, low level of fragmentation, see note).

2. If the French legislative elections had been held under a proportional system, the vote cast would have resulted in minority government or the need for coalition government in 1981, 1988 and 1997. Neither the Socialists nor the RPR and the UDF would have secured the overall majority (which is of 238 metropolitan seats in 1981 and of 278 seats from 1988 onward) required to form a government on their own. The majority would have slipped away and a hung parliament would thus have been the outcome in all but one election: in the 1993 contest, the RPR-

UDF alliance would have won enough parliamentary seats to control government on its own (328 seats as opposed to 120 parliamentary seats for the Socialists). Moreover, the balance of forces in Parliament would have been substantially modified under an alternative proportional system. In 1981, the right-wing alliance would have obtained 223 legislative seats while the Socialists would have received 198. The PS and their Radical allies would have secured only 225 seats in 1988 whereas the mainstream right-wing parties would have totalled 258. The gap between the two main blocks would have narrowed in 1997 with 219 seats for the Left and 223 for the RPR-UDF coalition.

3. The Communist Party would have irremediably lost its coalition potential after the 1981 election. In 1981, the PC would have obtained 53 seats while the PS would have won 198. The Socialists therefore would have been dependent upon the support of the PC to take office and form the government. In 1988, the number of seats secured by the Communists would have fell down to 39 which would have been anything like enough seats to help the PS to reach the overall majority. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the 1993 estimation: with only 30 legislative seats for the PC and 120 for the PS, the leftist coalition would have been far from securing enough seats. In 1997, the PC would have had 36 MPs, still not enough to build a PC-PS coalition in Parliament (since the Socialists would have won only 219 seats). The interesting point to be made in the case of the Communist Party is that PR calculations do not significantly differ from the actual numbers of seats won by the PC under the majority system. The Communists obtained 44 legislative seats in 1981, 25 in 1988, 23 in 1993 and 37 in 1997. Under both electoral systems, the decline of the PC is more than obvious. With an average number of 28 actual parliamentary seats over the 1988-1997 period of time (5 per cent of the total number of seats in the French Assembly), the party has become a minor political force that is never needed for a coalition that can control government.

4. Under a proportional system, the Green movement would never have reached political relevance and the issue of Ecologists being included in a Socialist-led government would never have arisen. Figures suggest that the Greens would have had no hope to obtain parliamentary seats in 1981 and 1988. They actually won no seats in the 1986 election which was held under PR system. With an estimated number of 21 PR-seats in 1993, the Entente would have still suffered of its lack of both coalition and blackmail potentials.

Divisions within the Green movement would have led to the loss of its parliamentary representation in 1997. In the theoretical scenario

where the Greens would have been unified to contest the 1997 election (hypothesis # 4), figures show an expected number of 14 PR-seats which is far from enough to affect the tactics of party co-operation of the other parties in Parliament.

5. In 1981, the Front national would have won no seats in the legislature. At the 1988 election, the far right would have received 33 parliamentary seats and therefore would have had a coalition potential: in 1988, the mainstream Right would have obtained 258 seats and could have been tempted to build an alliance with the FN to achieve an overall majority of 291 seats. In 1993, the expected number of seats won by the FN would have increased to 56 but the party would not have been able to force the RPR-UDF predominant alliance into a coalition.

The real impact of the Front national is obvious from the calculation for the 1997 election. Its first-ballot score would have brought the FN large gains in the Assembly. It is worth noting that the fragmentation in party politics would have substantially benefited the far right: its estimated number of legislative seats would thus have increased from 77 (hypothesis # 3, low level of fragmentation) to 88 (hypothesis # 1, high level of fragmentation).

With an expected number of only 223 MPs, the mainstream Right would not have secured enough seats to form a government on its own and therefore would have needed the 77 FN-seats to achieve the overall majority. The far right would have had a clear coalition potential and the possibility of government by FN/Right pact would have risen. The Front national would also have been able to exert a major influence on the co-operative strategies of the major parties. To achieve the overall majority without the help of the FN, the RPR-UDF alliance would have needed the support of a significant number of 55 leftist MPs.

Simulations PR - Legislative Elections 1981-1997

Legislative Election 1997				
Hypothesis # 1				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2435709	9.83	56	41
PS/PRS	6405510	25.86	176	188
MDC	266257	1.08	1	1
UDF/RPR	7594402	30.66	207	237
LDI	708101	2.86	2	0
FN	3775382	15.24	106	88
Greens	907592	3.66	7	0

The Changing French Party System

GE	431429	1.74	0	0
MEI	183735	0.74	0	0
EC	147946	0.60	0	0
			555	555

Hypothesis # 2

List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2435709	9.83	55	38
Left	7579359	30.60	196	215
Right	7594402	30.66	199	221
LDI	708101	2.86	1	0
FN	3775382	15.24	104	81
GE	431429	1.74	0	0
MEI	183735	0.74	0	0
EC	147946	0.60	0	0
			555	555

Hypothesis # 3

List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2435709	9.83	53	36
Left	7720520	31.17	196	219
Right	8019790	32.38	204	223
LDI	708101	2.86	1	0
FN	3775382	15.24	101	77
GE	431429	1.74	0	0
MEI	183735	0.74	0	0
EC	147946	0.60	0	0
			555	555

Hypothesis # 4

List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2435709	9.83	52	38
Left	6671767	26.94	172	190
Right	7594402	30.66	197	229
LDI	708101	2.86	1	0
FN	3775382	15.24	100	84
Ecologists	1670702	6.75	33	14
			555	555

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. Non-party and unclassifiable candidates have been excluded.

Overall majority = 278 seats.

Hypothesis #1 : PC, PS + PRS + Other Left (when supported by PS), MDC, UDF + RPR + Other Right (when supported by RPR-UDF), LDI, FN, Verts, GE, MEI et EC.

Hypothesis #2 : PC, Left = PS + PRS + Other Left (when supported by PS) + MDC + Verts, Right = UDF + RPR + Various Right (when supported by RPR-UDF), LDI, FN, GE, MEI et EC.

Hypothesis #3 : PC, Left = PS + PRS + All Other Left + MDC + Verts, Right = UDF + RPR + All Other Right, LDI, FN, GE, MEI et EC.

Hypothesis #4 : PC, Left = PS + PRS + Other Left (when supported by PS) + MDC, Right = UDF + RPR + Other Right (when supported by RPR-UDF), LDI, FN, Ecologists = Greens + GE + MEI + EC.

Legislative Election 1993				
Hypothesis # 1				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2273811	9.14	47	30
Extr.Left	432559	1.74	3	0
PS/MRG	4760669	19.14	123	117
Right	10960489	44.07	266	330
FN	3155702	12.69	81	57
Regional.	69514	0.28	2	0
Ecologists	1943131	7.81	33	21
			555	555

Hypothesis # 2				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2273811	9.14	47	30
Extr.Left	432559	1.74	3	0
Left	5020581	20.19	127	120
Right	10960489	44.07	265	328
FN	3155702	12.69	80	56
Regional.	69514	0.28	1	0
Ecologists	1943131	7.81	32	21
			555	555

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. Non-party and unclassifiable candidates have been excluded. Overall majority = 278 seats.

Hypothesis #1 : PC, Extreme-Left, PS + MRG (when supported by PS) + Presidential Majority (when supported by PS), Right=UDF + RPR + All Other Right, FN, Regionalists, Ecologists=Greens + GE.

Hypothesis #2 : PC, Extreme-Left, Left = PS + MRG + Presidential Majority, Right = UDF + RPR + All Other Right, FN, Regionalists, Ecologists=Greens + GE.

Legislative Election 1988				
Hypothesis # 1				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2680213	11.17	63	39
Extr,Left	88820	0.37	0	0
PS/MRG	8919641	37.17	214	225
Right	9742051	40.60	236	258
FN	2337158	9.74	42	33
Ecologists	86257	0.36	0	0
			555	555

Hypothesis # 2				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	2680213	11.17	62	39
Extr,Left	88820	0.37	0	0
Left	9012975	37.56	217	225
Right	9742051	40.60	235	258
FN	2337158	9.74	41	33
Ecologists	86257	0.36	0	0
			555	555

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. Non-party and unclassifiable candidates have been excluded. Overall majority = 278 seats.

Hypothesis #1 : PC, Extreme-Left, PS + MRG (when supported by PS) + Presidential Majority (when supported by PS), Right=UDF + RPR + All Other Right, FN, Regionalists, Greens.

Hypothesis #2 : PC, Extreme-Left, Left = PS + MRG + Presidential Majority, Right = UDF + RPR + All Other Right, FN, Regionalists, Greens.

Legislative Election 1981				
Hypothesis				
List	Votes	% Vote	Seats	
			PFR	PFM
PC	4003854	16.13	69	53
Extr,Left	311189	1.25	0	0
Left	9476490	38.18	190	198
Right	10664224	42.96	215	223
FN	43143	0.17	0	0
Ecologists	265096	1.07	0	0
Regional	24406	0.10	0	0
			474	474

Note : Figures are for metropolitan France. Non-party and unclassifiable candidates have been excluded. Overall majority = 238 seats.

Hypothesis : PC, Extreme-Left, Left = PS + MRG + Other Left, Right = UDF + RPR + All Other Right, FN, Regionalists, Greens.

Summary

Significant trends in recent years have been the tendency to fragmentation in the party system and the weakening of the traditional parties of the Left and the Right. There is some evidence of a growing crisis of traditional political representation in France. Popular disenchantment and distrust of the 'political establishment' are more than evident. Results of elections at both local and national levels show that voters are more likely to blame the party in office and remove it from power.

Successive political alternations can be seen as consequences of the greater voter willingness to decide on the basis of performance evaluation. The crisis of mainstream parties is obvious from the significant decline in the shares of the vote secured by parties of government (PS, RPR and UDF): not only incumbent governments but all the parties have lost ground in recent elections. Meanwhile, the increase in the average number of individual candidates per constituency shows clear signs of fragmentation in French party politics.

To a large extent, both the electoral instability and the political fragmentation can be seen as major transformations in party politics. The party system is moving from the traditional bipolar format to an underlying two-and-a-half system characterised by a tripolar Left-Right-Front national structure. Major changes in the distribution of contest types occurred at the first round of the 1993 election where most of the cases were characterised by a pentagonal contest type (PS-PC-Right-FN-Ecologist) at constituency level. In contrast, figures for the 1997 showed a reshaping of the party system with a predominant PC-Left-Right-FN format. Considering the relative electoral strength of the fringe parties over the 1981-1997 period of time, major features were: the sharp decline of the PC, the political irrelevance of the Green movement in the 1980s and again after the 1992-1993 elections, and the institutionalisation of the Front national from the late 1980s onward.

Transformation of the French party system was also evident from the changes in patterns of co-operative behaviour between the parties: in 1997, the party system was clearly falling in the two-and-a-half party system type.

A tripolar structure emerged from the configuration of electoral alliances: the Left (dominant Socialist party, declining PC and minor ecologist parties which had no likelihood to achieve political relevance on their own), the Right (with the alliance of the RPR and the UDF) and the Front national as a third component of the system. Both the changes in the

arena of competition between the RPR-UDF and the FN, and the transformation of the far right electoral support showed that the FN should be considered as a separate third block.

Moreover, the apparent stability of the bipolar format of French party politics relies predominantly upon the nature of the electoral system which still shapes voting behaviour and party strategy on a bipolar basis. In seeking an understanding of how fragmentation in party politics can affect the whole structure of the system, we looked at the possible political configurations that could have emerged from an alternative electoral system. PR simulations provided a more accurate picture of the underlying two-and-a-half structure of the party system.

Alternative results under a proportional representation system suggested:

1/ the vote cast would have resulted in minority government or the need for coalition government in all but the 1993 election where the RPR-UDF alliance would have secured enough parliamentary seats to control government on its own ;

2/ the balance of forces in Parliament would have been substantially modified ;

3/ the Communist Party would have irremediably lost any coalition potential after the 1981 election and therefore would have become a minor political force ;

4/ the Green movement would never have reached political relevance and the issue of Ecologists being included in a Socialist-led government would never have arisen ;

5/ the Front national would have acquired a coalition potential in 1988 ; its first-ballot score in the 1997 election would have brought the FN large gains in the Assembly while the mainstream Right would not have secured enough seats to form a government on its own and therefore would have needed the FN-seats to achieve the overall majority.

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