Introduction

Jocelyn A. J. Evans

In the more recent literature on European party systems, emphasis has been placed squarely upon the notion that the overall cross-national trend is one of convergence and, by extension, stabilisation. Where new parties have appeared, they tend to have been absorbed into existing structures and very few have actually superseded older parties. Increasingly, European systems which had stretched from the two-party system of Britain to the polarised pluralism of Italy are coming to resemble each other. Whether or not the premises for such a hypothesis are accurate, the French case at first glance shows few signs of conforming to such a model. In 2002, the French party system seems to be demonstrating a fluidity, if not outright instability, equal to any period in the Fifth Republic's history. The question this book aims to answer is: to what extent does this represent outright change and to what extent shifts within a stable structure?

Looking at the supposed format of the system before the presidential elections of this year, the key elements were a plural but essentially cohesive governing left, and a hopelessly divided right. By the end of the presidential elections, commentators were speaking of a hopelessly divided left and a newly cohesive right, a state of affairs confirmed and reinforced by the legislative election outcome in June. Granted, the cohesion of the left had always been suspect – largely the outcome of elite compromise and in particular the leadership of its Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin. Similarly, the right's fragmentation, although conforming to certain ideological differences, was always due more to personality clashes within and between parties than to any gulf of doctrinal incompatibility. However, the interaction between certain conjunctural events in the pre-electoral period and key institutional changes also pre-dating the elections combined to rebalance the party system in terms of its components if not in terms of its overall structure.

Moving from left to right, a previously governing Communist Party which had seemingly survived the post-1990 collapse of many of its sister parties clung on with 4.8 per cent of the first-round vote and 21 deputies

to form its own parliamentary group with little to spare. The previously governing Socialist Party saw its vote drop only by a relatively small margin, but the two-ballot system and relative absence of three-way run-offs – the famous *triangulaires* of 1997 – returned a paltry number of seats as a result. The Green Party remained on the fringes of the mainstream and of electoral success, unable to provide a credible alternative on its own, but hampered by its travelling on the Socialists' coat-tails. The Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF), once the presidential federation, had now been relegated to 5 per cent of the vote and only just able to secure enough deputies for its own parliamentary group.¹ The Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) and Démocratie Libérale (DL) (plus two-thirds of the UDF), brought together under the banner of the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (UMP), formed the first right-wing party in France able to unite the right in a manner similar to its Gaullist predecessors of forty years earlier. Finally, the extreme right still loitered menacingly on the margins of the right with one in ten votes, but was incapable of winning a single parliamentary seat, even with the apparently immense political capital of its candidate having reached the second round of the presidential elections.²

The presidential element had a larger effect than normal on the legislative elections both for timetabling and constitutional reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the inversion of the electoral calendar to put the presidential elections first meant that no party wanting to run an effective electoral campaign could avoid fielding a presidential candidate. Quite simply, because of the presidential priority and its outcome, there was no legislative campaign to speak of. Sixteen candidates in the presidential first round indicated that few parties were ignorant of this logic, but in the process so fragmented the vote that, at least for the left, the starting line-up proved catastrophic.³ Second, the recent reduction of the presidential term from seven years to five, partly as an obstacle to another period of *cohabitation* deadlock and partly as a rationalisation of an excessively long executive incumbency, has pulled the presidential candidates and their respective parties closer together. The effect of the five-year simultaneous mandates in terms of power distribution between president and governing parties is as yet unclear – what is clear, however, is that the tightening of the two executive branches helped to ensure the moderate right's effective unity and consequently its clear margin of victory.

However, despite the importance of these elections – indeed, all elections – in providing a benchmark for assessing the systemic array, the election results per se should not be looked at in isolation. Such changes are to be regarded as at least partly the result of shifts which have occurred in the French party system over recent years, and not simply the outcome of a combination of conjunctural effects and mathematical quirks. To address these, this book assesses the context to the

current situation and the extent to which the array we find today is in keeping with the changes in the system and the players within it in recent years. The contributors concentrate principally on the period subsequent to the *quadrille bipolaire* – the four-party, two-bloc array vaunted as the French ideal type in the semi-presidential two-ballot majoritarian system – which is largely held to have ‘peaked’ in 1978, and begun its ‘descent’ very soon afterwards.

The changes since 1978 have been principally conjunctural rather than structural. The main feature at legislative elections since the final follow-on victory of the right in that year has been alternation. Held up as a dynamic to which to aspire by proponents of an Anglo-Saxon remodelling of the system, this has been taken to extremes which had probably not been envisaged. Simply, neither bloc has been able to retain incumbency since that date – six changes of governing bloc in six elections over a little under one-quarter of a century. At the mass level, this *hyper-alternance*⁴ has had the greatest systemic effect, giving voters little to decide upon when making their electoral choice. For many voters, each side having had three periods in government and none having been seen as particularly successful, all mainstream parties look as bad as each other. When adding to this the periods of *cohabitation* where one has often been hard pressed to tell the two sides apart, Le Pen’s parody of the left and right as *blanc bonnet*, *bonnet blanc* seemingly has some foundation. However, even a rapid succession of swings of the electoral pendulum does not equate to party system change per se: re-equilibration has largely occurred between two stable blocs, one each side of the centre. The unoccupied centre and the floating voters of a Downsian logic have consequently remained deciding elements to elections since 1978, conditioned by the level of turnout and fragmentation within electoral blocs.

Newer smaller parties, who conversely *do* represent potential structural change if relevant within the system, have also been affected by this logic. The Greens could only hope to win a small proportion of the electorate, namely the committed environmentalist voters, if they attempted to remain faithful to their ‘neither left nor right’ stance of the 1980s. Similarly, Jean-Pierre Chevènement’s attempt to play a similar ‘off the spectrum’ republican card in the 2002 presidential elections led to disastrous results in both the presidential and legislative elections. In the former case, however, the decision to implant themselves firmly on the left reaped electoral rewards and a position in government. The other major player to reject the two-bloc labels was the Front National (FN). In terms of votes, this party was much more successful, winning 15 per cent at its legislative peak in 1997. Similarly, its *pouvoir de nuisance* allowed it to cause the moderate right severe problems in constituencies where it managed to advance to the second round together with the anticipated left and moderate-right run-off candidates. However, in representative

and governing terms, again the two-bloc system prevented it from ever winning more than a single deputy at any one time.⁵

Lastly, the 'empty centre' of the two-bloc system rejected any attempt to fill it with a cross-bloc alliance – for instance, the failed attempt of Michel Rocard to include the Centre des Démocrates Sociaux (CDS) segment of the UDF in the minority Socialist government between 1988 and 1993. The left–right logic remained and remains inexorable, at least at the national level and in the mainstream. At the sub-national level, in the second-order European elections, and as Alistair Cole notes in the opening chapter of this volume, 'on the margins' – the extremes and, at the mass level, among the disenfranchised, disenchanted pool of voters who are casting protest votes or abstaining in apparently ever-greater quantities – a different set of circumstances pertain, given the differing electoral systems and a separate set of stakes. There, the moderate right has not been entirely cut off from the extreme right, illustrated in particular by the ill-fated compromise by four UDF regional presidents to rely upon FN support in their councils in order to ensure incumbency. Moreover, there is greater scope for compromise within the mainstream in local councils than at the national level. As Jean-Luc Parodi has termed it, this 'electoral accordion', whereby the party systems at the different electoral levels expand and contract according to the rules of the game and the political context more generally, should have some knock-on effect at the national level – when the accordion opens, it does not close again in exactly the same fashion (Parodi, 1997).

The voters choosing the extremist candidates or not voting at all compound these distorting effects by effectively rejecting the rules of the game. Survey after survey reveal numerous voters decrying left and right as anachronistic and the parties which place themselves in these terms as atrophied. A large proportion of the electorate in the presidential election demonstrated their disenchantment by voting for electorally hopeless candidates – *le vote inutile*. Useless, that is, except in terms of demonstrating to the mainstream that they could not necessarily rely on their vote and that, as a result, some of them might not reach the second round. Yet, this dynamic did not reproduce itself at the legislative elections, at least not in terms of those who voted (abstention set a new record). Despite an unprecedented 8,444 candidates in the first round, the actual changes in vote were relatively sober. Small parties failed, the mainstream hegemons remained or were resurrected, and *le vote utile* resurfaced. The latent extremist pool remains, however, as a potent source of future change.

The threat of change being replaced by politics as normal has not been restricted to the margins, however. For instance, the area upon which perhaps clear ideological differences have been most apparent – Europe – between the members of the moderate right led to the UDF

and RPR–DL presenting separate lists at the 1999 European elections. Invoking the electoral accord once more, one might expect this schism to have some effect on coalition-building at the national level in 2002. And in fact, if we look at the first-round legislative ballots, the UDF precisely would not present single candidates with the RPR. However, this dynamic of *rupture* was confounded by the formation of the UMP in the aftermath of the presidential first round. Thus, the fragmentation of the moderate right alluded to at the beginning of this chapter has at a stroke been almost eliminated. A split right no longer matters because the redistribution of votes between the two sections is sufficiently skewed to make one almost irrelevant. The major forces for change are thus less a mutation of the structural pattern to the system and more the shifts of power within essentially stable structures.⁶

The above elements are a synthesis of the principal areas covered by the authors in the chapters which follow. Perhaps the most important element discussed is that of the cyclical shift in the balance of power towards the left and then back to the right between the mid-1990s and today. In this respect, David Bell's chapter on the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and Bruno Villalba and Sylvie Vieillard-Coffre's chapter on the Greens present the combination of strategic incentive and ideological disincentive that these parties have encountered in their role as props for the Socialist Party's government. The 1997 victory relied upon the Parti Socialiste (PS) presenting itself as a less arrogant party than it had been in the 1980s, and for this reason as well as for reasons of legislative necessity, it opened up to its 'extreme' and 'new' left flanks. The flanks have suffered as a result, partly due to their partners, partly due to their own failings. However, as Ben Clift notes, the success of Jospin in winning control of the PS in the mid-1990s despite competing factions within the party was not matched by an ability to ensure that similar cohesion extended in the long term to these two partners. The mutual intra-coalition sniping, the inability of the PCF to maintain an independent electoral following concomitant with a position of relevance and the Greens' almost pathological desire to assert autonomy from the Socialists have all contributed to the electoral defeat of 2002.

David Hanley's assessment of the years preceding this show the precariousness of the plural left entering the electoral campaign period, even when faced with the fragmented right and an apparently discredited president. Elite compromise may hold a governing coalition together, but at election time such coalitions demand more than just a consensus – which the *gauche plurielle* failed singularly to present anyway – among leaders. When such consensus is often absent on constitutional matters such as Corsica and on key aspects of economic and social policy, even the relative merits of the *gauche plurielle*'s incumbency can soon be overshadowed by negative elements. The PS's approach may have been

both strategic and worthy in equal measures, but the remaining contradictions cost the left dear, providing division at the presidentials and no subsequent basis for cohesion at the legislatives.

Moreover, such a lack of cohesion is not restricted to the elite level on the left. One of the two key questions asked in the chapter by Robert Andersen and Jocelyn Evans is: to what extent is there evidence of greater mass ideological cohesion on the left in 1997 than previously? The answer is 'none'. Granted, the *gauche plurielle* was at the beginning rather than the end of its relatively short life in 1997, but the ability of the parties to compete and to form a government might suggest some antecedent convergence. Until similar data become available for 2002, we can only speculate as to the extent to which convergence during the *gauche plurielle*'s reign occurred – but the speculation is still 'not at all'. In terms of competitive space, there have simply been too many voices on the left. Now many of them have been marginalised, but this does not solve the mainstream left's problems – now who can the Socialists reasonably ally themselves with to oppose the newly unified right? The success of returning to the same PCF–Parti Radical de Gauche (PRG)–Green trio – Chevènement's Pôle Républicain (PRep) being a terminally chastened force – is not assured of success, despite perhaps being inevitable.

Nevertheless, as is often the case in democratic competition, one side only does well because the other side is doing badly. Success is relative although in electoral terms the outcome is absolute. In the French case, the right seems to be victorious and cohesive only now that the left is in disarray, and thus we should perhaps not be too certain that the right's troubles are a thing of the past. The *front républicain* to oppose Le Pen's second-round candidature and Jacques Chirac's subsequent call for a presidential majority party all build upon the conjunctural elements which we have already highlighted, but they are in no way based upon any amicable resolution of personality clashes within the right. Nor have the parties suddenly resolved policy differences – these remain in some areas, and in others have been resolved gradually over many years. Chirac has simply found a context allowing him to assert almost total dominance over the moderate right, at least in the short term.⁷

As Andrew Knapp's chapter on the RPR and its presidential successor shows, the interference of the president in his own party has been a common and not altogether welcome aspect of his first incumbency. The clashes in particular with Philippe Séguin, former General Secretary of the RPR, led to perceptions of considerable party disunity during the late 1990s. The latter's departure in 1999 may have led to greater Chiraquian unity within the party, but it did nothing to alleviate tensions with the UDF. Nicolas Sauger's chapter illustrates the way in which the departure of DL in May of the previous year deprived the UDF of one of its more proximate elements to the RPR. Consequently, DL's acceptance of the

UMP has left the UDF isolated between the unified moderate right and the chasm of the centre. Its future appears unsure, to say the least.

As we have noted, the shifts in the system have not been exclusively focused upon the shift in the balance of power between left and right governing blocs. One of the specificities of the recent period in French party development has been the rise of the extremes, most notably the extreme right but also the continued presence of the extreme left. Both have proved more successful at presidential elections, suggesting that personality may play a substantial independent role in vote preference at this election. Whatever the reasons, however, the success of the extreme left has been a perhaps surprising corollary to the decline of the moderate left. Jim Wolfreys emphasises, however, that the success of the extreme left has been as much through alternative action – the social movements and protest which reappeared in the mid-1990s – as through the ballot box. Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot can thus mobilise support in the single national constituency in a way that their parties, groupuscular in their constituency support, cannot.

Conversely, the right extremists' support has implanted itself precisely at the regional level and consequently built up to a national level allowing over 10 per cent of the vote consistently since the mid-1980s. The success in the 2002 presidential elections was based upon the core support that the party has relied upon from its earliest days – older voters in the Midi and Eastern regions, supplemented by the industrial areas of the North and Parisian belt. The party which subsequent to Bruno Mégret's departure to form the Mouvement National Républicain (MNR) in 1999 had been declared dead still finds a stable electoral pool upon which to draw. Gilles Ivaldi's contribution implies that the relative failure of the party at the second round of the presidentials and at the legislative elections after its leader's success in the presidential first round may mark a zenith in its success. However, there is still undoubtedly a large pool of voters who are positioned in such a way in French political space as to be receptive to this party's political supply.

The status of this pool is somewhat unclear – certain authors have granted it 'separate status' as a new bloc within the French system; others prefer to see it as an extreme flank, but still part of the right. Andersen and Evans favour the latter interpretation, arguing that the extreme right does represent the radical side of the right bloc in ideological terms, and has done since the 1980s. In some ways, the social composition may be different to that of the moderate-right bloc, but the definition of voting blocs by social composition alone seems somewhat circular as an argument – and in ideological terms, there is no evidence that the moderate and extreme-right bloc do not share similar ideological positions, differing only in intensity.

Though perhaps unwelcome to the moderate right, this emphasises

that the differences between them and the extreme right are no more exacerbated in many ways than the differences between the moderate left and the extreme left (if socially less acceptable for many). In overall systemic terms, then, there appears to be remarkable stability in the bloc balance between left and right and between the elections of 1997 and 2002. Electoral flows are apparent in 2002, but these have principally occurred between the presidential and legislative ballots – from extreme left to moderate left; and from extreme right to moderate right. Given the landslide victory of the moderate right, some shifts from moderate left to moderate right are also likely. In many ways, this seems to correspond quite closely to the expected cyclical changes one finds in stable party systems – intra-bloc shifts and competition for the centre ‘floating’ voter. But one should not ignore that the extremes remain strong on the right, and have shown evidence of a pool of potential support on the left, even if this has so far been restricted to the presidential ballot.

A very similar conclusion is reached by Alistair Cole, who chooses to give the system the status of ‘artificial bipolar multipartism’. In other words, the stresses between the parties and their leaders pull towards increased fragmentation within the system, but the institutional framework continues to force this into the two-bloc logic. Given consistently rising levels of abstention among voters turned off by the choice ‘imposed’ by the current institutional framework, revisions to this framework are likely to go beyond the changes in presidential incumbency to date. Commentators continue to talk of the formulation of a Sixth Republic, although whether this indicates full regime change or simply a substantial amendment of the Fifth Republic is unclear. Furthermore, the ardour of incumbents to change a system which has brought them to power is always dampened by incumbency itself. The extent of institutional and constitutional change remains to be seen.

However, the form that such changes take are crucial to the future dynamics of the system. Calls for the introduction of proportionality to the legislative elections would favour smaller parties and increased fragmentation of the system. This may mean that the party tensions finally produce significant structural change once released from their current institutional constraints. Concomitantly, the European ‘issue’ dealt with by Jocelyn Evans also suffers from institutional binding and may turn out to be a future element to party system restructuring, as well as representing a separate arena with which the domestic party system has little interlinkage. To reiterate, however: the shifts which have occurred since the *quadrille bipolaire* seem to have taken place within largely stable structures.

We will return to shifts across time in the system in the conclusion, contenting ourselves for now with a couple of elementary observations

with which to introduce the authors' contributions. First, the hybrid status of the system – bipolar logic plus a certain level of latent polarisation – satisfies the Downsian model of an unoccupied centre and floating voters deciding the outcome to a certain extent; but the polarisation implies that fewer voters are to be found in the centre, many moving to more extremist candidates when the context is favourable. In this light, many of the chapters emphasise that while the parties themselves may lack the ideological keenness that we are told once characterised political parties, the electorate still wants to see such definition. While there may be the contented voter in the middle ground looking to sustain the status quo, this type is less prevalent than in other European systems. Parties can mobilise their electorates *if* they are able to take a clear stance on issues, and credibly so.

Second, and linked to this, the chapters on the mainstream parties all allude to the machinations that elites go through not only in their jockeying for individual influence within a party or a coalition, but also to be in a position to mobilise the electorates. Yet time and again, the elite manoeuvring hinders this aim, either because the electorate perceives this as elites putting their own careers before their representative function, and hence the electorate is turned away; or simply because the machinations fail, either due to internal intransigence or external pressures, and hence the electorate remains unmobilised. Two examples of this are well placed to conclude this introduction. First, the Socialists and the *gauche plurielle* – an electoral alliance designed from the vantage of opposition to encompass the various strands on the left and provide an electoral majority succeeded; but the same alliance in government singularly failed to back the supposed presidential candidate of the left or to secure its own return to power because elite manoeuvring could not disguise ideological dissent, and indeed often pandered to it. Second, the newly cohesive right and the UMP – parties seemingly destined to remain fragmented despite the best intentions of some elites – suddenly found themselves drawn inexorably together by the presidential framework and the need for cohesion in the face of an extremist threat, and consequently for many voters came to represent a credible governing alternative characterised by unity and effectiveness.

It is precisely such interactions between parties, electorates and the institutional framework – the supply and demand in the electoral market – that produce the outcomes which mould the party system. The chapters which follow will look at these three elements and their effects on each other in order to better understand the state that the French system finds itself in at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 With 22 seats won at the second round of the legislative elections, François Bayrou the UDF leader was confident that a number of former UDF deputies who had decamped to the UMP would return to the UDF parliamentary group. At the time of writing (summer 2002) the parliamentary group only numbered 29.
- 2 His stock was reduced somewhat by his crushing defeat in the second round of election, however.
- 3 The only main parties not to field their own presidential candidates were the MPF and the RPF – Philippe de Villiers was absent from the beginning, and Charles Pasqua withdrew his candidacy shortly after the beginning of the campaign.
- 4 A term coined in Evans and Ivaldi (2002).
- 5 Except for the 1986–88 period when the party won 35 deputies due to the proportional representation electoral system preceding this legislative term.
- 6 Remaining with the European theme, the transfer of power away from the domestic system is surely also a potentially influential restructuring factor. The effects on the domestic party system, as Chapter 10 shows, have to date been minimal, however; effects on policy-making, particularly in the economic sphere, have been much greater, but are evidently outside the remit of this book.
- 7 All 2002 post-election conferences have debated whether Chirac's destruction of his competitors on the right parallels a silent assassin or an accomplished demolition derby driver. No firm conclusion has yet been reached.