

## 8

## The French party system

### Change and understanding change

## 8.1 Introduction

Contemporary France is a democratic polity within which political parties perform such essential functions as political mobilisation, the aggregation of interests, organising political competition, feedback, public management and political recruitment. In comparative terms, however, the French polity is usually perceived to perform these essential functions rather poorly. The portrayals of French political culture we encountered in Chapter 3 pointed to *incivisme*, individualism and a distrust of organisations as important features of French society. Though these portrayals are overly impressionistic, French citizens do appear more reluctant to join party organisations than their northern European counterparts. Mass membership parties of the German or Scandinavian variety are rare; only the Gaullists and Communists have presented examples of mass parties. A powerful strand of French Republicanism has denigrated political parties as divisive, fractious organisations, whose existence is barely tolerated, and this on condition that they do not threaten the superior interests of the Republic. This distrust is best exemplified by the classic Gaullist tradition, within which the political movement facilitates a direct relationship between the providential leader and the nation but does not presume to intervene in this privileged relationship (Knapp 2004). The distrust of parties is embedded in one facet of the ideology of the Republican state itself, where the state represents the general will, superior to the particularistic interests represented by parties, groups and regions. There is no natural sympathy for the *corps intermediares* between the citizen and the state.

## 8.2 The French party system before 1981

The history of French parties prior to 1940 was one of fragmentation, regional specialisation and ideological posturing. (See Table 8.1 for a presentation for the origins and evolution of France's main parties.) On the centre and right of the political spectrum, party labels either did not exist or signified different political realities in different parts of the country. Centralised, coherent and disciplined parties did not emerge until 1945, with the creation of the Christian democratic

Table 8.1 Major French political parties: origins and evolution.

Party	Initial creation	Current initial	Past initials
Communist	1920	PCF	PCF
Socialist	1905	PS	SFIO, FGDS
Radical	1900	Radical/Radical party	MRG. Radical
Greens	1984	EELV	Les Verts
Centre	1945	MODEM/UDI	MRP, CD, CDP, CDS, FD, UDF
Gaullist	1947	LR	RPF, UNR, UDR RPR, UMP
Union for a Popular Majority	2002	LR	UMP
Conservative	1949	CNI	CNIP
Republican	1962	LR	RI, PR, DL, UMP
National Front	1972	FN	FN

MRP. The situation was clearer on the left, where there existed two well-organised rival parties after the Tours split in 1920: the Socialist SFIO (PS after 1969) and the Communist PCF. These fraternal enemies of the left have experienced a relationship based on mutual distrust. Long periods of conflict and rivalry have been punctuated by much shorter episodes of left unity (the tripartite government of 1944–7, the Union of the Left on 1972–7, the Mauroy government from 1981 to 1984, the plural left government from 1997 to 2002).

During the Third and Fourth Republics, the fragmented structure of the party system, along with the parliamentary basis of political power, had a direct and divisive impact upon governmental stability. No single party or coalition of parties could normally gather a lasting majority of support either within the country or within parliament to sustain majoritarian governments. Cabinets lasted an average of twelve months in the Third Republic and seven months in the Fourth (Williams 1964). This pattern changed gradually with the creation of the Fifth Republic. After an initial period of confusion from 1958 to 1962 linked to the consolidation of de Gaulle's leadership, the party system was simplified throughout the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s on account of the process known as bipolarisation. By bipolarisation, we mean the streamlining of parties into two rival coalitions of the left and of the right. Beginning in earnest in 1962, the height of bipolarisation occurred in the 1978 parliamentary election. The structure of the party system in 1978 was that of a bipolar quadrille. Four parties of roughly equal political strength divided voter preferences evenly between left (PCF-PS) and right (RPR-UDF) coalitions. These parties were the PCF and the PS on the left, the neo-Gaullist RPR and the liberal conservative UDF on the right (Cole 1990; Frears 1990; Machin 1989). There were several explanations for this process of electoral rationalisation.

The first series of explanations relate to the institutional rules of the game (Bartolini 1984; Evans and Ivaldi 2013). The enhanced prestige of the presidency as modelled by de Gaulle between 1958 and 1969, the bipolarising pressures of the direct election of the president after 1962 (only two candidates go through to the decisive second ballot) and the strengthening of executive government in the constitution of the Fifth Republic all favoured a rationalised party system.

The 2012 electoral series still suggested that the institutional architecture of the Fifth Republic (the presidency) and the rules of the game (the two-ballot electoral system) favour a bipolar party system, notwithstanding the breakthrough of the FN and the tripartite expression of popular choice (Grunberg and Haegel 2007). In historical terms, these institutional factors were even more important. With the emergence of stronger executive governments encouraged by the 1958 constitution, the capacity for Byzantine political manoeuvre by parties in an Assembly-dominated regime were weakened.

A separate, related institutional argument highlighted the role of the second-ballot electoral system in parliamentary elections (Cole and Campbell 1989). By its discriminatory effects against smaller parties, the second-ballot electoral system forced the centre parties to choose between the Gaullist-led majority and the left in order to survive. The second-ballot system also provided powerful incentives for ideologically neighbouring parties – such as PCF and PS – to form alliances, and it stalled (temporarily) the development of minor parties, such as the Greens or the FN, at important stages of their development. While the discriminating effects of the majoritarian system are obvious, the electoral system has not in itself prevented the emergence of new parties – as we shall see below.

The essence of the institutional argument relates to the emergence of the presidency as the lynchpin of the political system from 1958 to 1986 (Bell 2000; Evans and Ivaldi 2013). With the development of the presidency as the most powerful institution, the key contenders for office refocused their attentions upon the presidential election: to exercise influence, parties had to form part of rival presidential coalitions. The existence of disciplined, pro-presidential coalitions controlling the National Assembly for most of the period since 1958 contrasted with the instability of the Fourth Republic, where governments were short-lived, usually based on unstable coalitions and shifting party alliances. In short, until 1986, parliamentary majorities were elected to support the president.

Institutional explanations were necessary, but insufficient. Any analysis of the evolution of the party system needs to include more specifically political explanations, notably:

- the political leadership of de Gaulle;
- the historic impact of Gaullism and its role as a federating force of the centre and right;
- the survival instinct of the left-wing parties;
- the rejuvenation of the French PS and the rebalancing of the French left in the 1970s;
- the talented mobilisation of prejudice by Jean-Marie Le Pen during the 1980s and 1990s; and
- the repositioning of the FN by Marine Le Pen from 2011 onwards.

Analysis of the evolution of the party system must also incorporate – a third series – explanations based on social change: these varied from neo-Marxist arguments

relating to the emergence of the social class as the salient electoral cleavage, giving a sociological underpinning to left–right bipolarisation (Bacot 1974) to sociological analysis pinpointing the emergence of the ‘new middle classes’ as the central groups in post-war French society, favouring the emergence of broad-based parties such as the PS (Mendras 1989). As interesting as the insights of sociological analyses themselves is the close linkage between individual sociologists, economists and political scientists and the campaigns fought by the parties and their candidates. In the 1980s, the sociologists and philosophers around Pierre Rosanvallon directly influenced debates within the PS, providing a powerful intellectual drive for the movement around Michel Rocard which challenged Socialist statist orthodoxy. In 1995, the close linkage between Jacques Chirac and the sociologist Emmanuel Todd, whose ‘social fracture’ provided a rallying call for the former’s presidential campaign in 1995, was widely commented upon. Both sides selected rival thinkers to sustain their arguments during the 2005 referendum against the European constitutional treaty. Most recently, the breakthrough of Marine Le Pen from 2012 to 2017 and the success of the FN has drawn upon academic work carried out into the exodus of the popular classes from city centres to the peri-urban space, 30–40 kilometres from the large cities and identifying a captive electoral clientele (Guilluy 2012). The vigorous debates around the main parties, sustained by think tanks, clubs and revues, provides a resource for political parties in France.

The process of bipolarisation resulted from a combination of institutional, political and social pressures, though the precise alchemy between these different elements is a matter of interpretation. Gathering pace from 1962 onwards, this process of electoral bipolarisation between left and right reached its height in the 1978 National Assembly election. At this election, the four leading parties (PCF, PS, RPR and UDF) obtained over 90 per cent of the vote, with each party polling between 20 and 25 per cent. By 1978, the independent centre had been completely subsumed by the rival coalitions, mainly aligning itself with the Gaullist-conservative camp.

Since the mid-1980s, the structure of the French party system has become far less neatly balanced. The neat symmetry of the party system in 1978 has given way to a more complex pattern of uncertain and changing contours (Grossmann and Sauger 2009; Sauger 2010). There has been an increase in the number and a change in the nature of parties and the issues processed through the political system. The bipolar contours of the French party system have also been challenged by the emergence of new political issues, such as those of immigration, security and the environment. The rise of the FN from 1982 onwards was both cause and effect of a changed political agenda that the then mainstream parties were unable to filter. Likewise, the fluctuating fortunes of the Green parties have proved a test case of the disruptive force of new political issues and the difficulties experienced by the mainstream parties in articulating new political demands, notably those concerning the environment and post-materialist values. The five main developments in the past four decades have been:

- the decline of the PCF and the emergence of the PS as the main party of the left;
- the breakthrough, persistence, decline and revival of the FN;



- the emergence of minor, but significant parties such as the Greens, the Parti de Gauche (PG), the Mouvement Pour la France (MPF), Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Worker's Struggle) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League);
- a pattern of increased electoral volatility, with each election but one (2007) since 1978 going against the incumbent government;
- a certain disaffection towards traditional politics, as demonstrated in higher abstention rates and the weakening of the parties of the 1978 bipolar quadrille.

While the PCF, PS, UDF and RPR obtained over 90 per cent of the vote in 1978, in 1997 these parties scraped 67 per cent; by 2012, this figure had declined to 64 per cent. In part, the weakening of left-right bipolarisation stems from features peculiar to each party. The decline of the PCF is clearly a central theme (Courtois and Lazar 1995; Santamaria 1999). Any attempt to chart this decline must combine appraisal of the mistakes committed by the PCF leadership, with longer-term sociological and ideological trends, and the impact of the new post-Communist world order. The breakthrough of the FN is even more important (Mayer and Perrineau 1989; Mayer 1999). A comprehensive overview would require a similar approach to be applied to each single party, a task beyond the confines of this chapter. We now describe the main features of party system change in the turbulent decades since 1981.

## 8.3

## The changing French party system

When observing the French party system in 2016, one is struck by the opposition between a formal, bipolar and structured party system, as represented in national political institutions (the presidency, the National Assembly, municipalities and departmental or regional councils) and an informal multipolar, fragmented and contestataire (protest-based) pattern of party support. While there are many enduring features of party system stability, which we will explore in the final section, we are primarily concerned in the subsequent section to identify stresses and strains and to map out the important changes that occurred from the early 1980s onwards.

## The challenge of new parties

The emergence of new parties (or the breakthrough of previously marginal parties) and the reaction of pre-existing players to these party newcomers is the most obvious development (Appleton 1995; Dreyfus 2000; Evans 2003). The most significant of these parties are the Greens and the Parti de Gauche/Front de Gauche on the left and the FN on the right. There has been a plethora of more temporary and marginal forces that have had a lesser, but real, impact upon specific elections, or across particular issues. Such ephemeral or marginal forces as

The Right (La Droite), the Rally for France (Rassemblement Pour la France, RPF), the Independent Ecology Movement (Mouvement d'Écologie Indépendent, MEI) and Hunting, Fishing, Nature, Tradition (Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Tradition [CPNT]) fit this category. These movements testify to the importance of 'flexible specialisation' (Kitschelt 1997) as issue-specific parties rise and fall to exploit the contradictions of broader-based structures.

Ever since its origins, the French party system has spawned a rich progeny of minor parties and personalities. To retrace the history of France's minor parties, political clubs and extra-parliamentary groups lies outside of this chapter, but a brief attempt shall be made to classify different types of party. Four main types of minor party might be identified:

1. Former party factions have transformed themselves into independent political parties. One of the best examples is that of the Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC), a party created in 1990 out of the former CERES (Centre d'Études et de Recherches et d'Éducation Socialistes) faction within the PS. The MDC retains certain pockets of support where the CERES faction was formerly strong. The MDC and the 'Republican Pole' failed to build upon Chevènement's creditable performance in the 2002 presidential election (5.33 per cent) in the ensuing parliamentary contest (1.1 per cent, no deputies). This failure demonstrated the difficulties for party factions of surviving on their own outside of their former parties.
2. Since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, political clubs have performed a major role both in transforming parties from within and in challenging them from outside. During the 1960s, left-wing clubs were instrumental in renovating the structures of the non-Communist left outside of the SFIO. Since the 1980s, club activity has also gained ground on the right, with certain clubs – such as GRECE (Groupement de Recherche et d'Études sur la Civilisation Européenne) – acting as bridges between the far right and mainstream conservative politicians. Some of these clubs are genuine think tanks; others are mini-political parties, or else operate as factions within or across parties.
3. Certain parties form around particular individuals in conflict with their original party formations. One example is that of Philippe de Villiers and the MPF. In opposition with the UDF over the Maastricht Treaty and representative of an ultra-conservative strand of public opinion, de Villiers ran an independent list in the 1994 European election, which polled over 10 per cent, a freak performance de Villiers was unable to repeat in the 1995 presidential election (4.80 per cent).
4. Since May 1968, various small but significant anti-system left-wing parties have provided real competition for the PCF in its control over the far-left electorate. Those have included Trotskyites, Maoistes and *gauchistes* of various guises. The most enduring is Lutte Ouvrière (LO), a Trotskyite party which can trace its genealogy to the inter-war period. One of the principal surprises of the 1995 presidential campaign was the 5.37 per cent polled by LO candidate Arlette Laguiller in her fourth presidential campaign. In the 2002 presidential election, the three extreme-left candidates (Laguiller for LO, Olivier Besancenot for the LCR and Daniel Gluckstein for the Parti des Travailleurs [PT]) obtained

10.64 per cent, a remarkable performance that demonstrated the persistence of a vibrant and rebellious political tradition to the left of the PCF. By 2012, the fortunes of such extreme-left candidates had waned, faced with the strong performance of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the charismatic leader of the Left Party and candidate of the Left Front (supported by the PCF), who polled 11.1 per cent.

These marginal parties invariably define themselves as being against the parties of the political establishment and perform better in 'second-order' elections fought under proportional representation (regional elections, European elections) than in the decisive parliamentary or presidential elections. In the 2012 National Assembly election, a total of 6,591 candidates presented themselves in 577 constituencies, an average of eleven per seat.

By far the most significant of these 'new' parties is the FN. With around 15 per cent in the presidential (1995), parliamentary (1997) and regional (1998) elections, the FN could already claim to be the second formation of the French right. On the first round of the 2002 presidential election, Le Pen and Bruno Mégret, the two candidates of the far right, polled almost 20 per cent between them (16.86 per cent for Le Pen, 2.34 per cent for Mégret) outpolling the combined Socialist-Communist total in mainland France. In 2012, Marine Le Pen performed even better (17.90 per cent). In 2014, the FN became the first party of France, as measured in terms of votes in that year's European elections, polling just short of 25 per cent.

In party system terms, the success of the FN above all harmed the mainstream right, or, at least, it did until 2002. For almost two decades, the FN damaged the cohesion of the parties of the right by posing highly divisive dilemmas of alliance strategy, organisational discipline, political philosophy and policy adaptation. We can illustrate the damaging corrosive effects of the far right by comparing the 1997 and the 2002 National Assembly elections. In 1997, consistent with Le Pen's desire to defeat the Juppé government by fair means or foul, the FN maintained its candidates wherever it could on the second ballot. There were seventy-six left-right-FN triangular contests; the left won forty-seven, the right twenty-nine. Given the closeness of the result, the FN's tactics undoubtedly facilitated the arrival in power of the Jospin government. In the changed political circumstances of the 2002 National Assembly elections, the far-right parties were less able to influence the outcome of the mainly bipolar left-right second-round contests (Cole 2002). With a reduced first-ballot score in 2002 (11.33 per cent for the FN, 1.10 per cent for the Mouvement National Républicain [MNR]), the FN was less able to provoke the three-way contests that had been particularly damaging for the parties of the mainstream right in 1997. In 2002, there were only nine three-way fights, down from seventy-six in 1997. There were twenty-eight duels between FN and UMP (from fifty-six in 1997) and only eight duels between the left and the FN (from twenty-five in 1997). The right won back forty-three of the seats it had lost as a result of three-way contests in 1997 (Jaffré 2002). The main difference between the two elections related to the level of FN support, as well as the degree of unity of the mainstream right parties (low in 1997, high in 2002), a theme to which we shall return. A similar dynamic of institutional squeezing occurred in the 2007 and the 2012 parliamentary elections (though

the FN succeeded in electing two deputies in south-eastern France, including Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, granddaughter of Jean-Marie).

For long, the primary impact of the FN lay in its agenda-setting role. The FN forced issues such as immigration and security onto the political agenda and ensured that they remained there. If primarily detrimental to the mainstream right in party system terms, the FN has had a corrosive impact on all existing parties, especially in so far as it skilfully exploited the theme of the political corruption of the pro-system parties, the RPR, UDF and PS (and rejection of the 'UMPS' [a play on UMP plus PS, signifying a rejection of these establishment parties]).

### From faction to party

One of the most striking developments of the 1980s and 1990s was the rise of internal factionalism in almost all major political formations. There is nothing new about party factionalism. Divisions within parties were inherent in the parliamentary organisation of the Third and Fourth Republics. In the Fifth Republic, the modern PS was reconstructed after 1971 as an explicitly factional party, with the right to free expression of factions (*courants*) guaranteed within the party's constitution. From the 1990s onwards, party factionalism became a characteristic of the mainstream right (especially the UMP from 2002 to 2014), not to mention the PCF and the FN.

The most intractable factional conflicts arise in relation to personal rivalries, political strategy and policy differences (Hine 1982; Cole 1989). Personal rivalries testify in part to the normal contradictions of human agency. They also respond to precise institutional incentives in the Fifth Republic, to the pivotal role of the presidential election and, recently, to the organisational incentives for ambitious politicians to stand as a candidate for the presidency.

Even more than personal rivalries, however, the main parties have been divided on the question of alliance strategy and in relation to specific policy issues (such as Europe and immigration) (Crespy 2006). Issues such as European integration and immigration have divided existing parties and cut across traditional lines of political cleavage. Ideological and policy pluralism are broadly present in the mainstream traditions of the French left and right. In 1977, the leader of the Socialist reformist wing, Michel Rocard, contrasted the two cultures of the French left in a speech to the PS congress, one centralist and statist, the other reformist, decentralist and experimental. In 1982, the historian René Rémond wrote of the three families of the French right: Bonapartist, liberal and counter-revolutionary (Rémond 1982). The neo-Gaullist RPR (1976-2002) was divided over European integration; the UDF (1978-2002) was split wide open by the question of immigration and alliances with the FN. The so-called united party of the right and centre, the UMP (2002-15) was also deeply divided over socio-economic issues, migration and European integration.

If the first twenty years of the Fifth Republic were characterised by a tendency for the emergence of broad-based coalitions, the last decade of the twentieth century sorely tested the capacity for rassemblement of the main political formations. Each of the main party families experienced a split within its midst, as



there was a general move from faction to party. This move occurred within the PS (the creation by Chevènement of the MDC, later the PG by Mélenchon), the RPR (the creation of the RPF by Charles Pasqua) the UDF (the breakaway of Alain Madelin and Démocratie Libérale) and even the FN (the split of December 1998 and the creation of the Megret's MNR). Paradoxically, the generally poor performance of all of these factions-cum-parties reinforced the centrality of party and of the main political families. While factions can often exercise influence within a party, once outside of the party fold their influence is at best negative and short-lived (as in the case of Chevènement in the 2002 presidential election). The fate of Mélenchon's Left Party (confined to the influence of its leader in the European parliament) confirms the above point, as did the unwillingness of the PS rebels under President Hollande in 2012–17 (and especially Premier Valls in 2014–17) to split off and create a separate party.

### The diminishing legitimacy of traditional party politics?

However the success of the FN is interpreted – as a modern variant of fascism or as something else – the persistence at a high level of support for four decades of a populist party reveals a hostile attitude towards existing political parties (and an ambivalence towards liberal democracy) on behalf of a significant minority of voters. The inadequacy of political supply can be measured in other ways, most notably by the diminishing support for representatives of the two main political families, PS and Republicans, and by growing rates of abstention. In the 1994 European election, the two leading lists were reduced to a combined total of 40 per cent; in 1999, this figure was even lower. On the first round of the 1995 presidential election the two leading candidates (Jospin and Chirac) polled just over 40 per cent of the vote, a far weaker proportion than in any other presidential election (Cole 1995). In 2002, the two leading candidates (Chirac and Le Pen) did even worse: with 36.74 per cent of voters and barely over a quarter of registered electors (Cole 2002). By 2012, Hollande and Sarkozy, the two leading candidates, had raised the game of the mainstream formations, polling 55.69 per cent between them-still, just over half of the valid votes cast. At the time of writing, the prospect that the 2002 scenario might repeat itself in 2017 (the presence of the FN's Marine Le Pen on the second round) could not be excluded.

The corollary of this is the development of parties and movements which have defined themselves against the existing political elites, such as the FN, but also LO, the LCR and the PG. While these forces are marginal in the bipolar party system, they demonstrate the survival of a tradition of radical politics on the far left and extreme right, potently recalled on the first round of the 2012 presidential election when the far left (Mélenchon [11.1 per cent], Arnaud [0.6 per cent] and Poutou [0.2 per cent]) and extreme right (Le Pen [17.98 per cent] and Dupont-Aignan [1.8 per cent]) captured almost one-third of votes between them. The persistence and strengthening of the parties of the far left and (especially) national right reveals a profound disillusion towards the 'parties of government' of all complexions, especially on behalf of a popular (working- and lower-middle-class) electorate.

Marine Le Pen's score on 22 April 2012 (17.98 per cent) was all the more impressive in that it was obtained on the basis of a high participation rate. Over 6.4 million electors voted for Marine Le Pen, far more than for her father in 2007 (3.9 million), or for the combined scores of Le Pen and Mégret in 2002. The Le Pen electorate in 2012 was over-representative of those suffering from the most acute sentiments of economic and physical insecurity. More than ever, the FN candidate could lay a claim to expressing the fears of a France afraid of its future. Sociologically, Marine Le Pen was the leading candidate among industrial workers (33 per cent according to the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique) and performed strongly among clerical workers (28 per cent) (Fourquet 2012: 47). Chalard (2012) identifies three core FN electorates:

1. the traditional FN bastions in the south-east (where the FN returned its two deputies in the 2012 parliamentary election);
2. the industrial strongholds of the north and north-east, where the FN has become the principal force among industrial workers and the popular classes in the crisis-hit zones; and
3. the new breakthrough of support in the 'peri-urban' areas of rural and small-town France situated 50–80 kilometres away from the main urban centres.

There was a decline, by comparison to 2002, in city centres, but the FN candidate made a real breakthrough in rural and small-town areas, especially in parts of the country (western France) from which the Front had traditionally been absent. In these areas, economically fragile populations (rural workers, swelled by an exodus of working-class communities from the city centres) were receptive to the FN's message combining a call for protection against globalisation, a tougher stance on crime, security and immigration and a restoration of local public services.

The FN challenge has sustained itself against the backdrop of a public opinion which has lacked faith in political parties (defined broadly) to resolve intractable policy problems. This has tormented each government since 1981. After the economic miracle of *les trente glorieuses* (1945–74), political parties in government have proved incapable of dealing with the perception of prolonged economic crisis. The perception of economic malaise has had a destabilising effect on all incumbent governments since 1974. The problem of unemployment has proved to be particularly intractable – the real yardstick against which governments have been measured and the public burden of President Hollande since 2012. Since 1981, every single decisive election except that of 2007 (presidential or parliamentary) has gone against the incumbent government, in a manner that suggests the electorate's dissatisfaction with the performance of successive governments.

## 8.4

### Cohesion and continuity of the French party system

The French party system has been shaken to its core by problems of political, institutional and ideological coherence. Party fragility is real, but there are also countervailing forces in play. In the next section, we identify three underlying

causes of party continuity: (1) institutional incentives; (2) flexible and adaptable party organisations, cleavages and party lenses; and (3) the absorptive capacity of the main French political traditions.

### Institutional incentives

The prestige of the presidency and the majoritarian effects of the second-ballot electoral system are potent institutional variables. In a formal sense, at least, the bipolar party system remains a structural variant of the rules of political competition in the Fifth Republic, though we observe an ever-increasing gap between formal bipolarity on the one hand and the underlying fragmentation of electoral choice on the other.

In a rather paradoxical way, the potency of institutional variables was well illustrated by the 2002 electoral series, in theory the weakest case since 1962 for sustaining an institutional argument. The electoral series of 2002 defied many basic bipolar rules of the Fifth Republic. The first round of the presidential election did not produce a run-off between left and right. The second round was a quasi-referendum for democracy that produced the largest victory for any candidate in any free election in recent memory. The changing role of the presidential election points to the danger of attributing eternal features to the operation of particular political institutions. Rather than supporting from the first round the candidate they ideally want to see elected president (as in the traditional slogan 'choose on the first round, eliminate on the second'), electors have begun treating the first round of the presidential election as a 'second-order' election, expressing a preference in the same way they would in a regional or European election. In 2002, the belief that the first round did not count encouraged electors to support minor or extreme candidates, either through obstinacy or as a way of influencing the agenda of the candidate eventually elected president. Even in 2002, however, the electoral series ended with a return to (bipolar) politics as normal, powerfully assisted by the second-ballot electoral system which operated in a classic majoritarian manner. The PS was more than ever the dominant party of the left, the FN did not elect a single deputy, minor parties of all hues who had performed well on 21 April 2002 were not confirmed in subsequent contests, the RPR re-established its traditional domination within the French right and the president recaptured control of his presidential majority in the Assembly (Cole 2002). In advance of the 2017 presidential election, the incumbent president Hollande's worst case scenario was that a similar pattern of fragmentation on the left – between Communists, the Left Party, the far left and the Greens – would once again prevent the PS candidate from reaching the second round.

In addition to the institutional underpinnings of the Fifth Republic, the cohesion of the French party system also rests upon the bedrock of municipal office (as witnessed by the longevity of the generation of mayors first elected in 1977, many of whom finally retired in 2014), which has itself been transformed into an arena of mainly bipolar political competition, notwithstanding the successes of the FN in local and regional elections in 2014 and 2015. The bipolar basis of political competition in the Fifth Republic has spilled over into local

government (municipal and cantonal) elections fought under the second-ballot system. Since 1977, municipal elections in the large cities have by and large been contested by rival left and right lists, a pattern confirmed in 2001, 2008 and 2014. At the time of writing, the most recent local and regional elections confirmed the strong push of the FN, with the Front obtaining a little short of 25 per cent of the vote in the March 2015 departmental elections, and almost 28 per cent in the December 2015 regional elections, marked by the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of November 2015. But even in 2015, the FN did not manage to win a single departmental or regional council.

Structural explanations, then, are important in identifying how the institutional rules of the game have shaped important aspects of party competition in the Fifth Republic. But they do not tell the whole story. They have difficulty in distinguishing between different types of party supply and they underplay the dynamic and unpredictable qualities of the party system, as demonstrated by the breakthrough of new parties and the adaptation of older ones.

### Flexible and adaptable party organisations

The underlying stability of the French party system has also rested upon flexible and adaptable party organisations. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, French citizens appear more reluctant to join party organisations than their northern European counterparts. But this relative weakness of party organisation *stricto sensu* has certain advantages. The weakness of organic links with the trade unions or business, for example, has allowed French parties to reposition themselves more convincingly than their counterparts in certain other European countries. More generally, flexible organisational forms are well adapted to the particular structure of incentives in the French polity, focused on the exercise of power in municipal government as well as on the conquest of decisive (presidential and parliamentary) elections. Here we would again emphasise the importance of municipal government. For certain parties (PS, UDF, UDI) municipal government has served as a long-term substitute for a powerful party organisation; for others (PCF, RPR) municipal government has underpinned the illusion of a genuine party organisation. Once the municipal support is removed, the organisational chimera is laid bare. Even 'strong' parties, such as the PCF and RPR, have relied more on the logistical infrastructure provided by municipal government than on their formal party organisations. This has been demonstrated in numerous former Communist municipalities (such as Le Havre) where the PCF organisation has been severely damaged following the loss of the municipal council.

The case of the former UMP illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of flexible party organisations. Presented as the definitive move to unify the right and centre at its creation in 2002, by 2015 the UMP label was so badly tarnished that there was little opposition to the name change enforced by a returning Sarkozy in 2015. Haegel (2013) emphasised the weak institutionalisation of the UMP as one of its defining traits: the personal appointment of leading party figures by President Sarkozy from 2007 to 2012; the non-respect of party statutes



for the duration of the Sarkozy presidency; the failure to honour the early agreements about respecting the plurality of party families within the UMP all supported the weak institutionalisation thesis. At least Sarkozy's leadership allowed the UMP to survive as a rather emasculated version of the presidential party. Once Sarkozy lost against Hollande in 2012, the UMP slowly disintegrated, torn apart by a contested leadership election in 2012 and bitter leadership rivalries thereafter (setting former premier Fillon against the general secretary Jean-François Copé in particular). The Bygmalion funding scandal, the relentless internecine rivalries and the various legal challenges against its politicians involved in the Bettencourt affair combined to discredit the UMP. In a paradoxical turn, disorder left the way open for Sarkozy's return to the leadership in 2014, a move consolidated by victory in the 2015 departmental elections and a name change shortly afterwards. Our main point here is to emphasise the relative facility of the transition to the Republicans from the UMP, notwithstanding the proclamations of the eternal nature of the latter when created in 2002. Such fluidity renewed with a long history on the French centre and right.

The weakness of party organisation is not necessarily synonymous with a lack of organisational efficiency. The renewal of the PS in the 1970s was predicated upon an open dialogue with voluntary associations much more than upon a revival in party membership. Their cross-cutting membership served the interests both of the party and supportive voluntary associations, facilitating the exchange of policy ideas and personnel. In their own very different ways, the Greens and the FN learnt a similar lesson in the 1990s. The organisational capacity of the French Greens has been strengthened by the strong links maintained with voluntary associations (not just environmental groups). In the case of the FN in Orange and Toulon, the far-right municipalities created a network of parallel associations under the tutelage of the town hall (McAna 2003), somewhat along the lines of traditional Communist-run municipalities. These practices have positive and negative characteristics. They can be interpreted as embodying new forms of political participation. They can also contribute to a lack of transparent governance – municipally financed associations are sometimes little more than vehicles for the exercise of informal partisan influence.

The legacy of flexible and adaptable party organisations has allowed the main parties to introduce primaries in order to resolve the problem of candidate selection for the presidential election. This move came after internal party procedures had created unsustainable levels of organisational tension in the PS (the Mitterrand–Rocard battle for the presidential nomination from 1978 to 1980) and the RPR (the Balladur–Chirac rivalry in the 1995 election). The introduction of primaries, on the left (PS in 1995, 2006, 2011, 2017) and right (Les Républicains in 2016), was intended to provide a stable institutional cadre to allow supporters of the main parties to select an uncontested candidate. Though the rules differ between election and party, as a general rule the primary election opens up the candidate selection process to registered party supporters rather than just paid-up party members. The potential electorate is thereby increased tenfold (in view of the almost 3 million electors participating in the PS primary in 2011). As the primary process has taken root, supporters claim positive out-

comes in terms of authoritatively determining who should be the party's candidate and reducing the likelihood of dissident candidates on the first round. The success of the Socialist primaries in 2011, as a result of which Hollande emerged as the party's candidate after a tightly fought second-round contest with the outgoing PS leader Martine Aubry, was widely acknowledged, even by the rival UMP (Lefebvre 2011; Haegel 2013; Audemard and Gouard 2014).

Under pressure from rivals within the (then) UMP, Sarkozy promised to organise a primary contest for the selection of the Republican candidate for the 2017 presidential election. As the process is still ongoing (at the time of writing) judgement must be reserved. Two points are worthy of note. The first relates to the value of control over the party organisation: his rivals accused Sarkozy of using all the resources of the Republicans to secure a competitive advantage in advance of the primary election. Second, the evidence would appear to challenge the axiom that the primary process favours candidates best suited to appeal to the median voters. Potential Les Républicains candidates vied with each other in terms of proposing 'hard' security responses in line with the repressive national 'mood' produced by the string of terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016. The mobilisation of party sympathisers is certainly much broader than activists but still not necessarily connected with the median elector whose support would ensure the presence of the Les Républicains candidate on the second round.

### The absorptive capacity of the main French political traditions

One explanation of party persistence might be that parties express deeply embedded cleavages. Schild (2000) summarises the principal cleavages in French politics as being positional (left versus right), existential (religious versus lay), ideological (cultural liberalism against authoritarianism); socio-economic (class conflict) and issue-based. These *variables lourdes* (heavy variables) have lessened in significance since the early 1980s. The left–right cleavage remains pertinent in certain respects, but its mobilising force has diminished. The religious–lay cleavage retains the capacity to mobilise opinion on specific issues such as the defence of, or opposition to *écoles libres*, but the relation of cause and effect is uncertain. We demonstrated above that ideological cleavages can cut across party lines, as can those based on issues. Voting patterns corresponded far less neatly to social class identities in 2012 than they did in 1978 (Capdevielle 1981; Perrineau and Ysmal 1998, 2002). The electoral volatility of the new middle classes and the strengthening of the FN among the working- and lower-middle-class electorate explain these cross-cutting pressures. Moreover, as the issue of European integration demonstrates, party structures do not always correspond neatly to divisions over issues or ideologies. Traditional cleavages have clearly lessened in importance as France has undergone multiple internal and external changes, but they remain as cognitive maps within the collective memory. While there is no easy relationship between political attitudes and behaviour, partisan lenses can provide one way of comprehending and re-interpreting a changing environment.

### Robust political traditions

Lastly, the robust character of the main political traditions principally underpins the stability of the French party system: French-style Communism, socialism, liberal conservatism, Gaullism, Christian democracy and national populism. They can each trace their lineage back to the Second World War or much earlier and have each demonstrated the capacity to reinvent themselves to cope with changing circumstances and political incentives. Even when threatened by the rise of new parties and by the manifestations of disaffection with existing political supply, over time the French party system has proved its 'absorptive capacity' (Hanley 1999, 2002). The capacity for absorption is limited to the formal party system, as measured in decisive elections fought under the second-ballot system. It can account neither for the fragmentation of party support in second-order elections nor for the evidence of dissatisfaction with political parties that we uncovered in the previous section. And it is undoubtedly weakened by the rise and persistence of the FN.

## 8.5

### Concluding remarks

The decline of parties is not terminal. It is contingent on underlying political and economic circumstances. We can draw three main conclusions from the partially contradictory evidence presented in this chapter. Party system change is the first one. That the French party system has undergone change is obvious. The challenge of new parties, the decline of certain older parties (notably the PCF) and the limited capacity of existing parties to articulate new political issues have impacted upon the number and the nature of parties. Second, the issues processed by the party system reflect a changing policy agenda. On the one hand, new political issues such as the environment and immigration have forced their way onto the agenda. On the other, governmental realism and the end of 'lyrical illusions' associated with the abandoning of a certain type of left project under Mitterrand have refocused elite attention on public policies rather than competing visions of society. Third, partisan discourses have not proceeded apace. The resulting distance between political discourse and policy achievement has created disillusion and demobilisation among many French electors. This is one of the most convincing explanations of the public disaffection with political parties. This aspect of the crisis of party politics is arguably more apparent in France than in comparable countries. Because partisan discourses are deeply embedded in French Republican political culture, public expectations have been higher and the electoral retribution for failure has been harsher. This is the specifically French dimension of a broader pan-European phenomenon, whereby established party families have had to adapt to a series of internal and external shocks, cognisance of which has preconditioned their ability to survive and prosper. The form such fragility took in France – the rise of the extreme right, increased abstentions, a weakening of party identity – was nationally specific, but similar phenomena could be observed in comparable countries such as Italy

(where the entire post-war party system collapsed under the weight of political corruption), Germany (where the 'new politics' prospered on the failure of traditional social democracy) and Britain (where the breakthrough of the Eurosceptical United Kingdom Independence Party [UKIP] disrupted the party system and contributed to BREXIT).

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