9 French parties today

9.1 Introduction

In Chapter 9 we consider three of France's major political parties and movements: the Republicans, the Socialists and the FN. There are many more parties than this, especially if we adopt a long-term perspective. The PCF, for example, was the main party during the Fourth Republic and was amply discussed in the first two editions of this book. We provide a brief summary of the most important features of each of the main parties. Because these are different types of party, with varying historical, organisational and ideological traditions, the traits highlighted for each party are not necessarily the same. As a general guide, a brief history of each party will be followed by an overview of its beliefs, political appeal, organisation and leadership.

9.2 The Republicans and their allies

History

Les Républicains (The Republicans) were formally created in 2015 as the successor to the UMP that had claimed to unify the various parties of the French right and centre in 2002. In its time, the UMP was presented in 2002 as the fruit of a gradual evolution towards a unified centre-right party, along the lines of the German Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union). Studying the Republicans today is thus a means of retracing the history of the families of the French centre and right, in particular the synthesis between the Gaullist and non-Gaullist (liberal and centrist) movements and traditions.

The Gaullist movement and tradition

The Gaullist movement derived its initial legitimacy from General de Gaulle's proclamation in favour of a Free France in 1940 (Charlot 1970). The first organised Gaullist movement – the RPF – was created by de Gaulle in 1947. It became a powerful mass movement, deriving its identity from a combination of vigorous

anti-Communism, nationalism, hostility to the parliamentary regime of the Fourth Republic and personal attachment to de Gaulle (Charlot 1983). One of the principal movements of the late 1940s, by 1953 de Gaulle had dissociated himself from the RPF, a movement hijacked by conservative notables in quest of a bandwagon.

Gaullism as a political movement was resurrected by the events of May–June 1958. When de Gaulle returned in 1958, his followers formed themselves into the Union for the New Republic (Union pour la République Nouvelle, UNR). Emerging as a major political force almost overnight in 1958, the UNR became the pivot of de Gaulle's Fifth Republic (Charlot 1970). In keeping with his suspicions of political parties, de Gaulle did not openly acknowledge any link with the UNR. The UNR was the first de-facto presidential party. De Gaulle's prime ministers Debré (1958–62) and Pompidou (1962–8) called upon the Gaullists to imitate what was perceived to be the practice of the British Conservatives and the German Christian Democrats: to provide unflinching public loyalty and to keep criticisms away from the public eye. Debré gave the tone from 1958 onwards. The UNR was expected to be a subordinate institution, with no formal (or informal) influence over presidential decision-making. In return for supporting the president, the party benefited from de Gaulle's unprecedented popularity and from public approval of the new regime to strengthen its position. In June 1968, taking advantage of the fears raised by the May '68 events, the Gaullists won an absolute majority of seats.

After de Gaulle left the political scene, the Gaullists lacked a definite sense of purpose and ideological cohesion. There is a strong case that historic Gaullism died with de Gaulle. The UDR's difficulty in existing after 1969 testified to the personal rally dimension of the Gaullist movement. In the 1974 presidential election, former premier Chaban-Delmas, the official Gaullist candidate, obtained only 15.1 per cent, as against 32.6 per cent for Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, an independent conservative candidate. Giscard d'Estaing won the presidency in 1974 in part because the Gaullist interior minister Chirac led a powerful revolt of forty-three Gaullist deputies in his favour. Shortly after his appointment as premier in 1974, Chirac took over control of what remained of the Gaullist party. President Giscard d'Estaing's support was bought in the belief that the Gaullist movement would be delivered to the new president. Chirac intended otherwise. Control over the UDR was a means of reviving Gaullism from its electoral abyss, if necessary at the expense of President Giscard d'Estaing's own supporters. Conflict between Giscard d'Estaing and Chirac was thenceforth probable. Chirac's resignation as prime minister in August 1976 accelerated this movement. In December 1976, Chirac transformed the old party into a dynamic new organisation, renamed the Rassemblement Pour la République (RPR, Rally for the Republic), bearing a close resemblance to de Gaulle's RPF of the Fourth Republic. Although membership figures are notoriously unreliable, the RPR claimed to have an effective campaigning party organisation, along with the PCF and the FN (Knapp 1996, 2003).

The RPR officially ceased to exist in 2002, with the creation of the UMP. Any evaluation of the RPR must be mixed. All in all, the RPR occupied some sort of governmental office in only eleven out of the twenty-five years. Chirac was

unsuccessful in presidential elections on two occasions – in 1981 and 1988 – but victorious on two others – 1995 and 2002. As a general rule, the strengths of the RPR lay in those areas of weakness for the early Gaullist movements: especially municipal government and party organisation. The failure of past Gaullist movements (especially the UNR) to secure a solid base in local government was a key source of weakness (Williams and Harrison 1965). The power base of the RPR was its control over Paris, presided by Chirac from 1977 to 1995, and by Jean Tiberi from 1995 to 2001. The patronage and political prestige of the Paris town hall made up for the fact that the RPR continued to trail the centre-right UDF in terms of overall presence in local government (the ninety-six departmental councils, 36,500 communes and the twenty-two regions). The loss of the Paris town hall to the Socialist Bertrand Delanöe in 2001 proved a bitter blow from which the RPR never really recovered.

Beliefs and political appeal

The RPR differed in key respects from the historic Gaullism of the 1960s. The UNR was both a personalist rally behind a charismatic leader and a vehicle for mobilising support for the Fifth Republic. It was a movement with a broader sociological base than that typical of French right-wing parties. It obtained support from across the social spectum, with a strong undercurrent of working-class Gaullism essential for its success (Charlot 1970). The beliefs propounded by de Gaulle's UNR also set the movement apart from traditional conservative movements. Strongly influenced by de Gaulle's brand of nationalism, the UNR advocated national independence, social and economic interventionism, popular participation, support for a charismatic leader and loyalty to the institutions of the Fifth Republic. This alchemy of nationalism and populism set the Gaullists apart from mainstream European conservative or Christian democratic traditions, more integrationist and Atlanticist. Under President Pompidou (1969–74), the UNR became a more recognisably conservative movement, both in terms of the sociological composition of its electorate and in its beliefs and policies.

In its twenty-five years of existence, the RPR oscillated between portraying itself as a French labour party (1976), a tough anti-Communist movement in the style of de Gaulle's RPF (1979), a 'catch-all' party and a classic right-wing conservative party. Its message varied according to climate and clientele. At various times it stressed national populism (Chirac's 1979 Cochin appeal), at others European integration (the 1992 referendum). In the economic sphere, at times it appeared to favour economic neo-liberalism (1986–8), at others it advocated interventionist policies aimed at combating unemployment (Chirac's 1995 campaign). On the specifics of policy, the Gaullist movement was frequently divided. The cleavage over Europe was probably the most significant in this respect. During the Maastricht referendum campaign of 1992, the RPR was openly divided between opponents of the treaty (Séguin and Pasqua) and supporters (notably Juppé). Gaullist deputies were also divided on issues of constitutional reform, economic policy and popular participation. This flexibility was an important part of the RPR, a movement that placed greater emphasis on leadership, patriotism and

the tradition of *volontarisme* in domestic and foreign policy than on the specific content of policies.

Organisation and leadership

More than any other presidential party, leadership has always played a consciously important role in the Gaullist movement. The style and dimensions of such political leadership have varied over time. De Gaulle's authority over the Gaullist party was immense; to label the UNR as a personalist movement accurately captures at least part of its essence (Cole 1993). De Gaulle's authority did vary somewhat according to different generations. The wartime compagnons were entirely devoted to de Gaulle and accepted his decisions even when they disagreed with them (as leading Gaullists such as Debré did over Algeria). But the younger Gaullist generation, first elected as UNR deputies in 1958 or 1962, was less inherently deferential towards de Gaulle, more concerned with its own career advancement. The quality of the UDR as a presidential rally diminished greatly during Pompidou's presidency: from being in part a personalist movement dedicated to serving de Gaulle, the Gaullist party became less unconditionally devoted to its presidential leader, more a network for the dissemination of patronage.

The historical filiation of Chirac's RPR with Gaullism was undeniable, but Chirac's political leadership was markedly different from that of either de Gaulle or Pompidou. It was based on different criteria: that of a party leader in all but name. In 1995, the support of a powerful political party was an important ingredient of Chirac's presidential success. After his defeat in the 1997 National Assembly election, however, President Chirac lost direct control over the RPR, which fell first to his historic rival Seguin (1997–9), who in turn lost control of the ailing movement in 1999. In a remarkable turnaround of fortunes following his re-election in 2002, Chirac was able to impose the creation of the UMP, first as a platform for the 2002 parliamentary elections, then as an old-style party to support the president.

The liberal and centrist traditions and movements

Oui, mais . . . By this public phrase, Valery Giscard d'Estaing, then a young budget minister, signified his conditional support for the Gaullist-led majority in 1962, the first substantive rallying of the non-Gaullist centre and right to the Gaullist cause since the creation of the Fifth Republic. The Independent Republicans (1962–77) were created by Giscard d'Estaing in 1962 in order to rally those old-style conservatives who wanted to support de Gaulle over Algerian independence and over the direct election of the president. Most Fourth Republic conservatives opposed de Gaulle on these issues, but Giscard d'Estaing's pro-Fifth Republic movement progressively supplanted them. The Independent Republicans represented the bulk of the non-Gaullist fraction of the presidential majority, providing critical support for the Fifth Republic, for de Gaulle and later for Pompidou.

The Independent Republicans were replaced in 1977 by the Republican Party, ostensibly as a disciplined party capable of standing up to the RPR. In practice, the Republican Party was very similar to the older formation it replaced. It had a weak central organisation and was dominated by conservative notables, with their independent bases of political power, usually in local government. In 1998, the Republican Party changed its name to Démocratie Liberale, a more explicitly economically liberal and socially conservative party inspired by Alain Madelin. Démocratie Libérale in turn joined the UMP in October 2002.

Centrist alternatives

Openly centrist parties or presidential candidates have not performed particularly well in the Fifth Republic (Cole 1990). Due to the constraints of the second-ballot electoral system, self-identified centre deputies in the Fifth Republic have generally owed their election to conservative electorates and to alliances with parties of the mainstream right. This was notably the case for most 'opposition' centrists from 1962 to 1973. In presidential elections, self-proclaimed centre candidates (such as Barre in 1988, Balladur in 1995 and Bayrou in 2002, 2007 and 2012) have lacked credibility. The bipolarising pressures of the Fifth Republic have thus made life difficult, if not impossible, for a centre party that is genuinely independent from the parties of the left and right.

The UDF, the most significant party of the non-Gaullist centre in the Fifth Republic, was formed in 1978 by as a confederation of parties supporting President Giscard d'Estaing (Hanley 1999). It provided a fairly loose structure that housed the three main non-Gaullist movements of the centre and right: the non-Gaullist conservatives in the Parti Républicain, the centrist Centre des Démocrates Sociaux (CDS) and the remnants of the Radical Party, which could trace its origins back to 1901. Rather than being a party in the conventional sense, the UDF was a confederation of separate political parties, each anxious to preserve its identity and positions of political strength (Cole 1990). Only the few direct members gave the UDF any genuine existence as a federation.

The UDF was created just weeks before the 1978 parliamentary elections. The president's various parliamentary supporters (conservatives, Christian democrats, Radicals) were forced to agree an electoral pact in order to stand a chance against rival RPR candidates. The second-ballot electoral system for parliamentary elections (which usually discriminates against small or divided parties) and the prevailing atmosphere of conflict between Giscard d'Estaing and Chirac combined to promote the creation of the UDF as a matter of electoral necessity. In 1978, UDF candidates faced first round competition from RPR candidates, but in subsequent elections, the UDF and RPR agreed single candidates in most constituencies before the first ballot (Sauger 2003). The UDF was a limited success as an electoral cartel but a failure as a presidential party – or as any sort of party come to that. The UDF was most effective as a loose structure allowing the non-Gaullist parties of the centre-right to cooperate in their mutual interest and to bargain with the RPR. In 1978, the UDF comfortably outscored its RPR rival in terms of votes cast (though not deputies). In the 1981 presidential election, Giscard d'Estaing saw off the challenge of rival Chirac only to lose to Mitterrand on the run-off. In 1988, for the first time, the UDF became the larger of the two right-wing formations in terms of deputies, a position it held until the 1993 election. The UDF and its allies consistently outpolled the RPR in local elections and had more of a presence in the French Senate than the Gaullists.

Giscard d'Estaing had hoped that the UDF would be the basis for the emergence of a great centre-right party, a dominant presidential party to replace the Gaullists. Even while Giscard d'Estaing remained at the Elysée, however, the UDF lacked an effective organisational basis upon which to mobilise support. Once Giscard d'Estaing had lost the presidency, the UDF became little more than an electoral cartel. The UDF was weak and fairly undisciplined as a parliamentary party. From 1988 to 1993, the CDS formed its own autonomous group, before returning to the UDF fold in 1993. In the European parliament, UDF deputies formed part of various separate parliamentary groups. As a presidential party, it is doubtful whether the UDF as such ever existed. In the 1981 election, Giscard d'Estaing completely ignored the UDF, as did Barre in 1988. In 1995, the UDF was hopelessly split between those advocating support for Balladur, those demanding a UDF candidate and those backing Chirac. The UDF finally split in 1998 over the issue of whether or not to accept support from the FN in order to run a number of regional councils. UDF regional politicians accepted such support in four regions, provoking their exclusion and a formal schism.

Beliefs and political appeal

The history of the UDF was also the history of its component parties and the trajectories of a number of key individuals (such as Giscard d'Estaing, and former premier Raymond Barre). The largest party in the UDF was the Republican Party (1977–98), the inheritor party of Giscard d'Estaing's Républicains Indépendants. The other principal party within the UDF was the CDS. The CDS could probably lay the strongest claim to representing a 'centre' party in French politics (Dreyfus 1990). The CDS was the inheritor of the social Catholicism of the old MRP. Its political identity was consistently Catholic, social and European. It was less inclined to accept an unregulated free market than the 'neo-liberals' of the Republican Party. There was a good measure of geographical complementarity between the CDS and the Republicans. The Republicans were strongest along the Mediterranean coast and in the Rhône-Alpes area. The CDS electorate was a (rural) conservative electorate, with a geographical preponderance in western and eastern France. As with the Republicans, the real strength of the CDS lay in its fortresses in local and regional government and its strong parliamentary representation.

Leadership and organisation

Throughout its existence, the UDF provided a loose structure to regroup the non-Gaullist elements of the right-wing coalition and to allow for the survival of distinct political and geographical traditions resistant to Chirac's brand of

Gaullism. These specific traditions include those of social Catholicism, independent-minded conservatism and the vestiges of peasant anticlericalism. In the terms of Duverger's (1964) classic formulation, the UDF was composed of a loose collection of cadre parties forced to cohabit by the Fifth Republic's political rules of the game. It was neither a presidential rally of the Gaullist type nor a well-structured party such as the Socialists. With its solid base in local government, and in the context of the French practice of multiple office-holding (*cumul des mandats*), power within the UDF lay less with a designated leadership than with powerful local and regional barons, who combined strong positions in sub-national government with leading roles on the national level.

When the UMP was created in 2002, its proclaimed mission was to transcend the divisions between the various families of the French mainstream right (Haegel 2004, 2012). The UMP initially claimed to unify in one movement the Gaullist and liberal traditions of the French centre and right that had previously competed (most recently as the RPR and the UDF from the late 1970s until 2002). Far from acting as a synthesis between these two families, however, throughout its existence from 2002 to 2015, the UMP contained a range of opinions on matters of law and order, immigration, European integration and foreign policy. Above all, for most of its existence the UMP was subordinated to the instrumental imperatives of supporting Sarkozy in office, and internal debate within the UMP was frozen. After Sarkozy's defeat in 2012, there followed two years of post-defeat crisis, marked by organisational rivalry between general secretary Jean-François Copé, and former premier François Fillon, by evidence of the major Bygmalion funding scandal and by the eventual return of the prodigal son in late 2014, when Sarkozy was elected to the leadership with the support of two-thirds of activists.

The creation of the Republicans in spring 2015, following Sarkozy's election as leader of the UMP in November 2014, was intended to signal a new start. Despite the name change, the Republicans inherited most of the tensions of the UMP. The year following Sarkozy's return to the leadership was certainly marked by intermittent successes. Following the departmental elections of 2014, the Republicans controlled two-thirds of department councils, and at the regional elections of December 2015, the Republicans won seven out of twelve regions in mainland France (though the Socialists remained in charge of five regions). These modest successes could not conceal the persistence of deep divisions, however, centred on Sarkozy's leadership (contested by former premiers Juppé and Fillon, as well as several ambitious younger politicians), political strategy (what attitude should be adopted towards the FN) and policy positions (especially on issues of migration and security). The unfinished business of who would represent the centre-right in 2017 provided the backdrop for these tensions. The commitment to hold primary elections in 2016 to determine the party's candidate for 2017 was confirmed by Sarkozy, but the promise brought questions of political positioning to the fore. All candidates were aware of the dangers of a '21 April in reverse', whereby divisions would squeeze the centre-right between the Socialists and the FN and allow the second-round run-off to take place between the Socialist Hollande and Marine Le Pen. But there was no unanimity over the best strategy to adopt to ensure victory, or even to ensure the Republican candidate's presence on the second round:

1. Sarkozy's preference: to fight an identity- and values-focused campaign similar to that of 2012 in the hope of limiting the FN's advance; or
2. Juppé's strategy: to pursue a centre-right campaign designed to mark the boundaries with the FN and rally the support of centre-right (and centre-left) electors.

This overview has identified the persistence of two main currents that have coexisted within the mainstream right in the post-Gaullist period: the Gaullist and the liberal traditions. The continuing appeal of Gaullism is centred upon the nation, an affirmative state and an active foreign policy based on national independence; the liberal tradition centres its appeal on society, social solidarity, European integration and respect for individual political and economic liberties (Lazorthes 2014). The Gaullist focus on the nation was exemplified by de Gaulle and the withdrawal from NATO in the name of national independence in 1966; by Chirac and the Cochin Appeal of 1978; by Seguin/Pasqua and the opposition to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992; and by the presence of leading figures of the UMP in the no campaign in 2005. The liberal focus on society was demonstrated in the New Society project defended by Chaban-Delmas in 1971, which was itself a precursor to Giscard d'Estaing's vision of an advanced liberal society, a pluralist conception of state and society whereby the future of France lies in ever deeper European integration as well as the lessening of the intensity of domestic conflicts. Any future president emanating from the ranks of Les Républicains will be judged by their ability to transcend these endemic tensions between nationalism and liberalism.

9.3 Socialists, Communists and Greens

History

The first unified Socialist party in France, created in 1905, carried the curious title of the French Section of the Workers' International (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, SFIO) in deference to its formation on the orders of the Second International. It brought together a total of six small Socialist parties, an early pointer to the divided nature of the French left. Throughout its existence (1905–20), the first (and only) unified Socialist party was racked by conflict between orthodox Marxism and evolutionary, gradual socialism. This conflict has remained present within the French left ever since.

The strange death of the French Communists

At the Congress of Tours in 1920, the SFIO split into two parties in response to the challenge posed by the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. A majority (around two-thirds) of delegates voted to accept Lenin's twenty-one conditions and created the Parti Communiste Français, the French Communist Party. The

creation of the PCF was one of the key developments in the history of the French party system. The consequences of the Tours split were long-lasting. It gave the PCF a revolutionary identity, a belief in its destiny as the future harbinger of Socialist revolution. It also ensured that the PCF accepted the leading role of the Soviet Union in world affairs. During the inter-war period, the PCF was gradually transformed away from being an ill-organised collection of romantic revolutionaries into becoming a tough Bolshevik organisation, dedicated to furthering the aims of the USSR and tightly organised along democratic centralist lines (Tiersky 1974). The wartime Resistance movement transformed the PCF into the major political force of the left, a status it occupied until the mid-1970s. In 1944, the Communists joined with Socialists and the Christian-democratic MRP in a post-war resistance coalition, which collapsed under the impact of the Cold War in May 1947, with the Socialists and the MRP combining to expel the Communists from government (see Chapter 2).

The PCF's weakest performance in the Fourth Republic (25.8 per cent in 1956) comfortably surpassed its best showing in the Fifth Republic (22.5 per cent in 1967). From being France's largest party in 1946, with over 28 per cent of the vote, the last independent PCF candidate, Marie-George Buffet, polled just over 2 per cent in the 2007 presidential election. The PCF's decline can be related to repeated mistakes made by the leadership, the collapse of Communism and the process of social and ideological change (Bell and Criddle 1994; Lavabre and Platone 2003; Pudal 2004).

The creation of the Fifth Republic marked a fundamental watershed for the PCF. The party opposed the return of de Gaulle and paid a heavy price for it. In 1958, the PCF lost one-quarter of its electorate, most of the lost voters being working-class people attracted by de Gaulle's blend of nationalism, charismatic leadership and promise of strong government. The PCF always relied disproportionately on the industrial working class for its electoral support. The PCF was a victim of the modernisation of French society and economy and the stiff competition for industrial working-class support first from Mitterrand's PS, in the 1970s, latterly from the FN.

The PCF was disorientated by the collapse of 'real socialism' in the USSR. Loyalty to the USSR was an article of faith for generations of Communists. The PCF had been moulded into an effective pro-Soviet party during the inter-war period, whereas the other important west European Communist parties – in Italy and Germany notably – had been crushed under fascism and had been reconstructed as new parties during the wartime resistance to fascism. For as long as it survived, the PCF was never really able to distance itself sufficiently from the USSR and the Soviet model of Communism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PCF lost its most consistent model of reference. It has proved unable, or unwilling, of replacing it with anything else. Finally, the PCF was damaged by its repeated changes of strategy, oscillating between unity with the Socialists (the Common Programme 1972–7, Communist ministers in 1981–4 and 1997–2002 Socialist-led governments) and hard-line anti-socialism. The ascendancy of the hard-liners condemned the PCF to gradual irrelevance.

French Socialists forever in search of a role?

At the Tours Congress in 1920, a minority of delegates retained the title Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière and called themselves Socialists. Although the Communists were the larger element in 1920, by 1932 the Socialists had come to dominate the French left. In the 1936 election, an alliance of Communists, Socialists and radicals won the first left-wing majority in France's history. Following the Popular Front election victory, the Socialist leader Léon Blum formed a Socialist–radical coalition government. The PCF, arguing that it was a revolutionary party, refused to join. Despite a series of important symbolic social reforms being enacted (paid holidays, the forty-hour week), the left-wing government rapidly ran into serious economic and political problems. It survived barely one year, collapsing when radicals withdrew from Blum's government. More than the Popular Front, the French version of the post-war social-democratic consensus had its genesis in the tripartite government of 1944–7. This post-war coalition of progressive forces (Communists, Christian democrats [MRP], Socialists) left a robust reformist record to its credit after thirty months in office. It introduced France's comprehensive social-security system; enacted important civil and social reforms (female suffrage, workplace committees) and consolidated state-led economic planning. The breakdown of the tripartite government in May 1947 was a by-product of the onset of Cold War in Europe, compelling the MRP and the SFIO to combine forces in order to expel the PCF ministers from the governing coalition (Johnson 1981).

The early post-war period represented the political and intellectual ascendancy of the French left, including the Socialists. During the period 1947–69, however, the history of the PS was one of almost uninterrupted decline. From a post-war high of 21 per cent in 1945, the SFIO had declined to 12.5 per cent in 1962, before sinking to 5.1 per cent in the 1969 presidential election. The PS experienced the first decade of the Fifth Republic as a stagnating party with few new ideas, ageing political personnel and an outdated political strategy. The Algerian crisis (and the role performed therein by the former SFIO premier Guy Mollet) produced a formal split within the SFIO in 1958, with the creation of the Parti Socialiste Autonome in 1958, becoming the Parti Socialiste Unifié (PSU) in 1960. From the early 1960s onwards, key initiatives came from outside of the SFIO, from several left-wing political clubs and from the PSU. Most future Socialist personalities began their careers either in the clubs or in the PSU. Few began their careers in the SFIO. François Mitterrand took control of the party in 1971 at the Congress of Épinay, at the head of an alliance principally directed against the former SFIO leader, Mollet. As so many others in the new PS, Mitterrand came from outside the SFIO, the power base of the future president being a movement of left-wing political clubs known as the Convention des Institutions Républicaines.

The rise of the Socialists was the major political occurrence of the 1970s. Political strategy, sociological change, ideological evolution and Mitterrand's political leadership were all important in explaining the success of the PS (Cole 1994). During the 1970s, Mitterrand's PS was a party well attuned to the institutional, social and political imperatives of the Fifth Republic and the social structures of French society. Unlike a classic social-democratic party, there was never

any organic link with organised labour, arguably an advantage for a broad-based party. As in Italy, however, for many years the PS had to adapt its strategy to cope with the leadership (until 1974) of the PCF on the left. Only upon victory in 1981 were the Socialists finally liberated from the overbearing ideological presence of the Communists, a legacy that still influences the party's verbal radicalism today (Cole 2011; Grunberg 2011). Unlike the PCF, the PS was a party that, on an institutional level, could credibly contend to win the presidency, the supreme political prize of the Fifth Republic. Mitterrand understood that there was no future for a party, such as the old SFIO, which refused to respect the new political rules of the Fifth Republic, centred upon victory in the presidential election. Mitterrand finally achieved such a victory on his third attempt in 1981. After the decade of revival (1971–81), the French Socialists experienced a decade of being the presidential party (1981–93) before being brutally rejected by the French electorate in 1993, unexpectedly returning to office in 1997, losing again in 2002 and 2007, and finally emerging as victors of the 2012 electoral series.

Beliefs and political appeal

Mitterrand's PS came to articulate the demands of many new social movements arising in the 1960s and 1970s. New social-movement activists figured prominently among the influx of new party members, which by 1975 had transformed the old SFIO into a recognisably new party. On a sociological level, the PS (in 1981 and 1988 especially) appeared to be a genuinely inter-class party, repeating a feat achieved previously only by the Gaullists in the 1960s. At its best, the PS managed an original synthesis between being a catch-all party, appealing to the traditional left-wing electorate attracted by orthodox Marxism (the culture represented by the PCF) and articulating the concerns of new social movements and themes given expression in May '68.

The fate of Mitterrand's governments was discussed in Chapter 2. The electoral coalitions built by Mitterrand in 1981 and 1988 were not sufficiently robust to guarantee against a downturn in party fortunes after the inevitable compromises made in office. In 1993, the PS lost almost half of its 1988 electorate, and, though the decline from the 1997 election was less marked in 2002, the direction was the same. From 1993 to 2007, the popular electorate appeared to have lost faith with the Socialists (Rey 2004). Hollande's election in 2012 only temporarily reversed this trend (Cole 2013).

The decline of the PCF, discussed above, forced hard-edged questions of electoral alliance to the forefront. Once Jospin recaptured control of the PS after his 'victorious defeat' in the 1995 presidential election, the search for a new winning coalition produced the plural-left formula. The plural left was an electoral (then governmental) alliance between five parties: the PS, PCF, Greens, radicals and the Citizens Movement. Rather than the parties engaging in first-round competition, the plural-left label allowed united left candidates (usually PS, but with some constituencies reserved for their partners) to contest the election from the first ballot. The plural left represented a modified version of the old Union of the Left strategy, with the PS–PCF alliance extended to radicals, Citizens and, especially, the Greens. As time wore on, the cohesion of the plural-left coalition was increasingly undermined by its internal contradictions. These included the rival strategies pursued by parties within the coalition (especially the competition between the Greens and the Communists for status of the second party); the basic incompatibility of certain policy choices (such as between Chevènement and the Greens over Corsica, or the Greens and the PCF on nuclear energy) and, increasingly, polarisation in view of first round of the presidential election. The main parties all nominated candidates for the first round of the 2002 presidential election: the Communists (Robert Hue), Citizens (Chevènement), Greens (Dominique Voynet) and radicals (Christiane Taubira), with the effect that the Socialist premier Jospin failed to win through to the second round.

The plural-left government led by Jospin delivered a distinctive political programme that bore some similarities with the 1981–3 period. As the PS returned to office shortly after the election of the Blair government in the UK, the comparisons were inevitable. Consistent with its own traditions of discursive radicalism and the enduring influence of French Marxism, the French Socialists rejected most of the precepts of New Labour. In response to Blair's 'third way' between the old left and the new right, Jospin pointedly refused to define a new orientation between social democracy and liberalism, preferring the former to the latter. While Blair advocated reforming the policy environment to adapt to globalisation, Jospin stressed the importance of EU and state-level public-policy intervention to control globalisation. While Blair assiduously courted business during the first term, the landmark reforms of the Jospin premiership, and especially the thirty-five-hour week, were implemented in the face of fierce business opposition. Consistent with the traditions of the French left, the discursive basis of Jospin's method was that politics matters. There was a strong faith in state action to fight unemployment, promote growth and reform society. In spite of the reputation of the plural left as a bold reforming government, the PS suffered major setbacks in the 2002 presidential election, when Jospin failed to make the second round, trailed the FN leader Le Pen and promptly resigned on the evening of 21 April 2002. The PS culture of discursive radicalism counted for little when the party was being judged upon its record in office.

The left returned to office in 2012. Shortly after Hollande's presidential victory in May, the June 2012 parliamentary elections provided an overall majority in seats (315) for the Socialists and their close allies. By 2012, the plural-left strategy had run its course. Though the PS agreed an electoral pact with the Greens (to the latter's great advantage, with eighteen deputies), it limited its cooperation with the Left Front (thirteen deputies with allies) to the traditional Republican discipline. Sensitive to the concerns of the party, Hollande's sixty campaign propositions drew liberally on the Socialist Programme adopted in 2011, unlike Ségolène Royal's earlier programme in the 2007 election.

The experience of the Socialist-led government since 2012 is discussed in Chapter 2. From the perspective of the party itself, the new Socialist experience demonstrated some older elements of continuity. First, the conquest of power (Hollande's victory) did not reconcile much of the PS with the exercise of power (the policy choices required once in government). Almost from the inception, a vocal left faction rose in opposition to the policy choices of

the Hollande–Ayrault pair. With one foot in government (led by the minister of industrial reconversion, Arnaud Montebourg, and the minister for social affairs Benoît Hamon), and another in virtual opposition (the existence of a group of thirty to fifty PS deputies, known as the *frondeurs*, ready to vote against the government), the left faction weighed upon certain governmental choices during the 2012–16 period. On the other side, a reformist, modernising wing crystallised around interior minister Manuel Valls, who became prime minister in April 2014, joined by finance minister Emmanuel Macron from 2014 onwards. Modernisation was embodied in the Macron Laws of 2015, though the content of these laws was more symbolic than substantive. President Hollande attempted to occupy the centre of gravity in a balancing act that recalled his former function as first secretary of the PS at least as much as the arbiter-president of the Fifth Republic.

Leadership and organisation

The post-1971 PS represented, among other things, an uneasy compromise between a Gaullien-style presidential rally (inspired by Mitterrand's leadership after 1971) and a strong tradition of party organisation and self-sufficiency (as embodied in the old SFIO). The post-1971 party laid great stress on its quality as a democratic party, as an aspiring mass party, even as a *parti autogestionnaire* (a party advocating workers' control) inspired by the ideals of May 1968. Of equal importance was its character as a factionalised party: the resurrection of the PS during the 1970s was linked to the fusion of a variety of pre-existing political groups into a single party (Cole 1989; Clift 2003). The structures of power within the PS continue to be determined in part by factional allegiances. At the Poitiers Congress in 2015, for example, there was a broad consensus conference motion designed to demonstrate unity and support for the government and to rally the party behind support for a new presidential bid by Hollande in 2017. Beneath the surface, however, the party's various factions negotiated seats on the executive committee in accordance with previous estimates of their importance within the party. The majority motion hence included pragmatic urban reformers around Gérard Collomb, mayor of Lyon, but also supporters of Martine Aubry, mayor of Lille and spokesperson for party's left.

The 2012–17 government once again raised the question of what sort of party is the PS? That it is still a factional party is evident. It cannot contend to be a mass party; membership estimates of 200,000 are generous. In the absence of a powerful mass movement, the PS has drawn its reputation, organisational resources and political credibility from its control of local and regional governments. The examples given above of Collomb and Aubry illustrate that a firm base in local government continues to ensure influence in PS national politics. The loss of major cities (such as Toulouse and Strasbourg in March 2014), departments (symbolically, Hollande's Corrèze bastion in March 2015) and regions (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Rhone-Alpes, Provence-Alpes- Côte d'Azur) was a bitter blow to the PS organisation. Is the PS merely a presidential rally, that is, a machine to select and support a candidate for president? The success of the PS primaries in 2011

occurred because the voting constituency was broadened well beyond the traditional party members and activists; the party itself was fairly marginal to the procedure and reconfigured on the basis of the results in the primary election.

Capturing control of the the party is no longer an adequate gauge of the ability to stand as the party's candidate; Martine Aubry controlled the party from 2008, but failed to win the primary and secure the party's nomination. Is the PS mainly a party in office, a version of Katz and Mair's cartel party? If the PS cannot be reduced to its officials and representatives, these have occupied an important role. The parliamentary group exercised considerable influence after 2012, forcing modifications of many proposed laws on the Ayrault and Valls governments.

All in all, whichever interpretation is favoured, the immediate future looks bleak for the French Socialists. A (likely) failure to reach the second round in the 2017 presidential election would provoke a major crisis and a possible realignment or party split. In the medium and longer term, the French Socialists are confronted with a particularly intense version of the social-democratic dilemma, whereby the diminishing intellectual and political weight of Keynesianism since the 1970s, combined with economic globalisation and European integration have not only disempowered social-democratic parties in office but also called into question the foundations of social democracy as a political project (Kitschelt 1999; Callaghan 2000; Ladrech 2000; Thompson 2000; Pierson 2001; Crouch 2014).

The turbulent French Greens

The breakthrough of the French Green parties in the early 1990s (10.85 per cent in the 1989 European election, 15 per cent in that of 1994) represented part of a European-wide movement, propelled by the impact of environmental and post-materialist politics and dissatisfaction with the traditional left (Sainteny 2000; Villalba and Vieillard-Coffre 2003; Spoon 2007). The Greens have performed particularly well in European elections (in 2009, for example, the EELV lists only narrowly trailed those of the PS). Green candidates have performed less well in the presidential contest (Voynet, 3 per cent in 2002; Noël Mamère: 5 per cent in 2007; Eva Joly, 2.25 per cent in 2012), but they have occupied a strategically important position since the decline of the PCF has forced the Socialists to cast their net wider for electoral allies.

From the early 1990s, and the triumph of Voynet's progressive alliance against Antoine Waechter's 'neither left nor right' strategy, the French Greens have mainly seen themselves as part of the left (Cole and Doherty 1994). Cooperation with the Socialists has never been easy, however, and the Greens have consistently sought to broaden alliances beyond the PS. The fact remains that those Green deputies elected in 1997 and 2002 depended for their success on support from Socialist voters and the prior standing down of PS candidates. In 2007, the Socialists refused a nationwide agreement with the Greens, reducing the latter to a rump of three deputies. In 2012, Hollande, fresh from victory in the Socialist primary, negotiated a very favourable agreement for the Greens in order to

ensure maximum support for presidential majority candidates in the 2012 parliamentary election (ensuring the return of eighteen Green deputies). More than two decades after the first breakthrough of the Greens, there are well established traditions of Green–Socialist collaboration in leading French cities, starting with Paris, where PS mayors Delanöe and Anne Hidalgo have governed the city in alliance with the Greens since 2001. Such alliances have also existed at the regional level; on occasion, the Greens have even occupied the post of regional president (Marie Christine Blandin, president of the Nord/Pas-de-Calais region, 1994–9).

Rather like the Communists in their period of strength, the Greens have been divided by questions of participation in Socialist-led governments. Voynet held the environment portfolio throughout the plural left government (1997–2002). More recently, in the Hollande presidency, two Green ministers sat in the Ayrault government for almost two turbulent years, with housing minister Cécile Duflot most clearly leaving her mark in the rented housing sector, a field beyond the traditional environmental brief. The decision not to join the Valls government in April 2014, driven by Duflot herself, produced a period of intense internecine conflict and eventually a split within EELV.

Organisation and leadership

Unlike for most French parties, the official organisation of the Green party is highly indicative of its genuine character. The central organisation of Europe, Europe Ecologie–Les Verts (EELV, Ecology, the Greens) is extremely weak, with only minimal control over local and regional organisations. The internal decision-making processes are based mainly on direct democracy, with the party's sovereign annual assembly remaining open to all members: around 600–700 members usually attend out of a total membership of some 5,000. As in other Green parties, there is no unified leadership in EELV; rather, fluid factions representing different sides in internal conflicts have risen and fallen. This informal type of party organisation has bred organisational chaos, and the French Greens appear increasingly as a modern version of the old PSU, a movement bursting with ideas, but hopelessly divided and with a limited electoral clientele.

It would be misleading to judge the Greens merely by weighing their electoral performance. As harbingers of political ecology, the French Greens have contributed to placing new issues on the political agenda which mainstream parties have been forced to address. The influence exercised by environmental issues remains strong within French public opinion. As the German example reveals, the electoral fortunes of Green parties ebb and flow rather more than those of older established European parties. This is partly incumbent upon their representing a particular type of party. Rather than a party, in the classic sense of the term, the French Greens appeared to many as a single-issue movement, notwithstanding their efforts to produce coherent policies across the whole range of issues. There has never been a consensus that a political party is the most appropriate means of promoting Green issues: social movements such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have in the past been critical of any attempts to organise ecologists into a political party. As their counterparts elsewhere, the French Greens appear as a radical middle-class new social movement. The social characteristics of party activists in Les Verts are consistent with the young, highly educated and new middle-class profile of activists in other Green parties.

9.4 The Front National

History and electoral evolution

The Front National (FN) was born in 1972 as the 'latest attempt at regrouping the forces of the extreme right' (Shields 1990: 187). The FN's electoral audience was initially limited. In 1978, the FN obtained 0.4 per cent. In the 1981 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen failed to obtain the support of the 500 elected politicians (mainly local councillors) necessary to stand as a candidate. Scattered successes in the 1983 municipal elections were followed by good performances in by-elections towards the end of the year (at Dreux and Aulnay-sous-Bois). The first national breakthrough occurred in the European election of 1984: 10.95 per cent. In subsequent elections during the 1980s, the FN polled an average of 10–12 per cent. During the 1990s, this figure was closer to 15 per cent. With around 15 per cent in the presidential (1995), parliamentary (1997) and regional (1998) elections, the FN could claim to be the second formation of the French right until fractured by the Le Pen–Mégret split of December 1998 and the subsequent electoral collapse of June 1999 (5.1 per cent for the FN; 3.3 per cent for the splinter party, the MNR). Even during the abyss of 1999, however, the combined FN and MNR vote was around 10 per cent in local elections. The earthquake of 21 April 2002, when Le Pen broke through to the second round, saw the combined FN and MNR electorate fall just short of 20 per cent (19.2 per cent). One decade later, 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 (Shields 2013). By 2014, the FN had emerged as the largest party of France in the 2014 European election, admittedly favourable terrain for a Euro-sceptical party, a feat repeated in the 2015 regional election at which the party polled almost 28 per cent. In mid-2016, when these lines were written, Marine Le Pen figured in a good position to win through to the second round of the 2017 presidential election, though ultimate victory appeared unlikely.

The FN has travelled a long distance since its humble origins of 1972. Understanding the FN requires a good comprehension of why the movement broke through in the first place as well as how it has evolved and transformed itself in the process from a marginal formation of the French far right to one of the three leading forces in French politics.

Interpretations vary as to why the FN was able to achieve a major breakthrough. At least five important explanations relating to the FN's initial successes appear credible, though none is satisfactory on its own.

1. The breakthrough of the FN was an ultra-conservative reaction to the radicalisation of politics in the aftermath of Mitterrand's victory in May 1981. For the

most hard-line fraction of the right-wing electorate, the parties of the mainstream right appeared lacklustre in their opposition to the Socialists' radical reform programme of 1981–3. The FN offered uncompromising opposition to the Socialist–Communist government. The 1984 FN electorate was bourgeois in its socio-professional profile (Mayer and Perrineau 1989). Early support for Le Pen came from the most hard-line fraction of the traditional right-wing electorate and the popular classes only joined the Le Pen bandwagon later on.

2. The breakthrough of the FN was facilitated by the existing political parties, in so far as these parties attempted to exploit concern over immigration to score political points off their rivals. The PCF was the first party openly to exploit the theme of rising immigration for its own political purposes (Schain 1987). The RPR–UDF opposition used immigration as a stick with which to beat the Socialists during the 1983 municipal elections. The Socialists themselves retained an ambiguous attitude towards the FN, whose survival would weaken the parties of the mainstream right. Mitterrand's introduction of proportional representation for the 1986 National Assembly election was inspired in part by the calculation that a parliamentary presence for the FN might prevent the RPR–UDF coalition from obtaining an overall majority (Cole and Campbell 1989).
3. The breakthrough of the FN was tied to economic crisis. Neither left nor right had been able to come to terms with the post-1973 economic crisis. The assimilation of unemployment with immigration was a central feature of Le Pen's initial political message. Simplistic solutions to the problem of unemployment were attractive to a proportion of the electorate alienated by the broken promises of left and right. As it became an established political force, the FN picked up substantial support in the deprived outskirts of leading French cities, where high levels of unemployment and crime coexisted with large numbers of 'immigrants', although detailed studies repeatedly demonstrated that there was no easy correlation between FN support and the concentration of immigrants (Fysh and Wolfreys 1992).
4. The breakthrough of the FN was a manifestation of discontent with the political system. Popular distaste for mainstream politicians was increased by the spate of corruption scandals that occurred throughout the 1980s. The FN appealed for support on the theme of 'clean hands' (borrowed from its Italian sister party). Le Pen skilfully exploited an anti-political strand within French political culture. As a new party, the FN was not tainted with the failings of the existing parties, partly because it did not hold many positions of elected responsibility. It was a party that claimed to stand outside of the existing 'corrupt' political system. Le Pen's attacks against the 'gang of four' should be understood in this sense; three decades later, Marine Le Pen's tirade against the 'UMPS' displayed a similar populist logic.
5. The party's founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was a practitioner par excellence of demagogic political leadership, who astutely manipulated the personalisation inherent in the Fifth Republic's presidential system and exploited the mass media in order to spread his message. The simplistic solutions advocated by Le Pen made it difficult for mainstream politicians to compete on grounds the FN leader himself had defined. The ability to shock public opinion kept Le Pen in the public limelight. His provocative criticism of immigrants for making unwarranted demands on French society, for aggravating the economic insecurity of native French workers and for creating problems of law and order found an echo in French public opinion. His carefully timed anti-Semitic outbursts and his questioning of the veracity of the Holocaust, however, condemned the movement to occupying a limited political space on the far right of French politics. The overwhelming rejection of Jean-Marie Le Pen on the second round of the 2002 presidential election (81.25 per cent for Chirac) demonstrated the limits of the FN's electoral support.

No single explanation will suffice to demonstrate the FN's breakthrough. Each contains partial truths, but also its own internal weaknesses. Explanations based on the resurgence of a national-populist strand of political culture do not account for the fact that the FN emerged at a particular point in time. The personal-leadership explanation underplays the social forces underpinning the FN's emergence. The initial political explanation (the idea that the FN was a radical reaction to the left in power) cannot account for the fact that the FN initially performed better under the right from 1986 to 1988 and 1993–5 than it had done under left-wing governments. The economic-crisis interpretation cannot account for the fact that the crisis had persisted since 1973–4 without political extremism. All of these ingredients were necessary to explain Le Pen's breakthrough.

A national-populist movement

Rather than the details of its initial breakthrough, the most pertinent questions now are why the FN has survived for over four decades, and what has been the impact of this survival on the party system and French politics as a whole? The FN has proved its capacity to resist in each type of election the regime has to offer, whatever the electoral system used. This sets it apart from past far-right movements, such as Poujadism of the Fourth Republic. It has performed well in elections fought under proportional representation (European and regional elections), but it has stood up well in other contests as well (departmental, municipal and legislative elections). In the 2015 departmental election, for example, the FN polled almost 25 per cent in an election that had not previously provided fertile political terrain.

Interpretations of the character and appeal of the FN vary and the movement itself has evolved during its existence. How might we understand the political appeal of FN? Is it best understood as a national-populist movement, in the sense defined by Mény and Surel (2002)? National populist movements have prospered in several European countries since the 1980s and have mobilised across a broad range of national themes:

- the defence of a threatened national identity;
- the dangers of immigrants and immigration;
- scepticism to external forces such as European integration.

National-populist movements often express a fear of Islam and the conflict of civilisations. Though usually associated with the political right, national populism can also find an outlet on the left; the case of Syriza in Greece, framing its message in terms of the defence of the oppressed Greeks against the Troika and financial capitalism, is a good example. Populism signifies the appeal to the people, against the elites, against parties, against foreigners, against economic alienation. It offers simple, alleged solutions to difficult problems: for example, expel three million immigrants to resolve the problem of unemployment (Jean-Marie Le Pen). It promotes policies that are 'crowd-pleasing' rather than rational or optimal solutions to policy problems (Canovan 1999). The powerful cocktail of the Nation and the People has sustained the FN in France and similar movements elsewhere for several decades.

The staples of the Nation and the People allow for flexible responses over time and the ability to respond to changing public anxieties. The national reference is pervasive: from the early programmes in favour of national preference onwards, the frame of the nation has been used by the FN to justify otherwise disparate political stances and political messages. We observe the adaptation of the national cadre in a rather instrumental manner to justify the changing position on economic policy, for instance: the FN has shifted from a position close to radical right economic liberalism and anti-Communism during the 1980s to one of narrow economic protectionism and the protection of workers' rights under Marine Le Pen. The centrepiece policy is France's exit from the European single currency. The threat to national identity is the centrepiece of the FN's mobilising appeal. The FN has proved capable of mobilising popular fears across a range of apparently unconnected themes such as immigration, law and order, AIDS and European integration.

The populist part of the equation ties to the anti-politics, anti-corruption, anti-system referred to above. The social bases of the FN are different from those of the classic right-wing parties. In 1984, traditional right-wing voters, radicalised by the presence of the left in power, supported the FN. By 1986 (and in subsequent elections), these electors had returned to their traditional conservative base. As time has progressed, the FN electorate has become more popular and less bourgeois. In the 1995 presidential election, Le Pen outpolled any other candidate among industrial workers (27 per cent). In 2002, the Le Pen electorate was also the least well-educated electorate of the three main candidates. In 2002, Le Pen was the favoured choice of the lower middle classes (31.9 per cent) and of workers (26.1 per cent), far outdistancing both the Socialist Jospin and the Communist Hue in working-class support (Cole 1995, 2002). The FN has traditionally obtained good scores in the eastern half of France, especially in the large cities, where there are large concentrations of immigrants, combined with situations of urban deprivation. The strongest concentration of support has been along the Mediterranean coast: in Marseilles, Nice and Toulon. In these cities urban tensions are complicated by the presence of large numbers of *pieds noirs*, white Algerian settlers forced to return to the mainland after Algerian independence. Since the early 2000s, the FN has made spectacular progress in the former mining bastions of the Pas-de-Calais and the industrial wasteland of the Nord, where it has emerged as the party of the working class and assumed the role of

the tribune of the people previously performed by the PCF. Since 2012, the FN has also made inroads in areas of traditional weakness (in western and south-west France in particular), where it has mobilised rural and small-town voters, some driven to desperation by the farm crisis, others driven to exodus from city centres on account of high property prices (Chalard 2012; Guilluy 2012). By contrast, the FN has been declining in the more prosperous city centres.

While not exactly a single-issue party, Jean-Marie Le Pen made his political reputation by stressing one issue above all others, which might be summarised as 'France for the French'. Immigration and security are consistently cited as the essential policy issues by FN voters (Perrineau and Mayer 1989; Mayer 1999). France has always been a country of immigration. But whereas past immigrants were Catholic Europeans (in the twentieth century Italians, Portuguese and Spanish), post-war immigrants were mainly of North African origin, with their own well-developed culture and religion, which many feel to be antagonistic to mainstream French culture. The arrival of second- and third-generation immigrants onto the French labour market and manifestations of cultural difference have reinforced the problem of the integration of ethnic communities into mainstream French culture.

A party like other parties?

Under Marine Le Pen's leadership since 2011, the FN has sought to distance itself from far-right legacy of her father's movement. Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN retained a strong link with what Rémond (1982) called the counter-revolutionary right: it attracted a ragtag collection of marginal groups committed to various lost causes, such as monarchists, Vichyites, former Poujadists, *pieds noirs* (former Algerian settlers), practising Catholics, anti-Communists, anti-abortion activists and self-proclaimed fascists. Under Marine Le Pen, such ideological bedfellows are no longer welcome. Indeed, there has been a sustained attempted to embrace the disenchanted and poorer sections of French society as well as to adapt themes, such as *laïcité* (the secular tradition in French politics), that are traditionally associated with the left. The FN's version is a perversion of *laïcité*, its opponents would say, whereby the legacy of the separation of church and state in 1905 is adapted to contest the expression of religious diversity in the public space (headscarves, public prayers, ostentatious symbols) and to play more generally to anti-Muslim sentiments in public opinion. Interestingly, however, the distancing of the FN from public religion has also extended to hard-line Catholics, traditionally a force to be reckoned with in the FN. More precisely, there has been division within the FN over whether or not the party should support Catholic activist causes (such as opposition to gay marriage). Under the Marine Le Pen's leadership since 2011, the FN's modernisation has involved a liberalisation on social issues, such as divorce, abortion and the rights of homosexuals. More traditional sentiment has survived, however, articulated powerfully by Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Jean-Marie's granddaughter, and FN deputy in the Vaucluse.

The contrast between the two FNs is most striking in relation to its stance towards the Marxist left. The initial rise of the FN in the 1980s was clearly linked

to the presence of Communists in government. In one of his earliest TV talk shows (*L'Heure de verité*, February 1984), Jean-Marie Le Pen's message was above all an anti-Communist one: he expressed support for the dictator Pinochet against the Marxist coalition in Chile, and some sympathy for Franco. By 2015, under Marine Le Pen, the FN was accused of being crypto-Communist, celebrating the victory of the radical left Syriza party in Greece in January 2015 and the victory of the no vote in the Greek referendum a few months later. The FN has assumed the role of the *parti tribunicien* (protest party), the self-styled voice of the people against the elites. In part, this role reflects the electoral base of the FN, which is stronger than any other party in the former industrial heartlands that used to provide mass support for the PCF. Rather like national-populist parties elsewhere, the FN has surfaced the wave of Euro-scepticism, of hostility to 'Brussels' and of fear of the economic crisis.

Marine Le Pen has sought to personalise the movement in the perspective of the 2017 presidential election: the Rassemblement Bleu Marine (Rally for Marine) has emerged as a distinct entity within the FN centred on the candidate. Marine Le Pen has also sought to professionalise the movement, as a prelude to an eventual participation in government. There has been a sustained effort to rally academic and cultural personalities and economists (such as Jacques Sapir of Paris University) in support of the party. The strong visibility of vice-president Florian Philippot demonstrates the symbolic presence of an *énarque* as one of the lead players. The entourage has been expanded to allow anonymous civil servants to provide expert advice across the range of policy issues. While awaiting a hypothetical conquest of power, the FN has been gaining practical experience from exercising power in important municipalities.

Is the FN a party like the others? After almost forty years of existence, the Front has occupied few positions of direct influence within the French political system. It has only two deputies and two senators. The second-ballot electoral system used for National Assembly, departmental and municipal elections penalises parties, such as the FN, which are unable to make alliances with other parties. In 2014, it returned twenty-four members of the European Parliament. In 1992 and 1998, it elected hundreds of councillors to serve in the twenty-two regional councils, provoking a change in the electoral system after 1998 to make it much more difficult for the FN candidates. In 2015, however, the FN led on the first round in six of France's thirteen regions. Though it narrowly failed to win any region, it could count some 350 regional councillors and is present in all mainland regions.

Until 1995, it ran no large councils. The capture of three major councils in the 1995 municipal election (Marignane, Orange and Toulon, to which Vitrolles was added shortly afterwards) was an important breakthrough. For the first time, the FN had access to the various resources provided by control over municipal government (such as land use, housing, culture and some municipal employment). In the large city of Toulon (over 100,000 inhabitants), the FN council was unable to implement much of its electoral programme, hedged in by legal constraints, opposition from state officials (in the prefecture) and internal divisions. The municipal majority disintegrated with the split in 1998 and the FN was defeated in the 2001 election (McAna 2003). In 2014, the FN won a string of small and

medium-sized towns in its Mediterranean and northern strongholds (Beziers, Frejus, Hayange, Forbach, Henin-Beaumont and several others). Controversy followed on the heels of electoral success: in Beziers, for example, the town hall was caught collecting 'ethnic' data officially forbidden in France.

The inability to control its municipal authorities demonstrates that the FN is not immune from its own contradictions: on economic and social policy in particular and societal issues more generally. Elections since 2012 have demonstrated its success as a first-round party (in the 2014 municipal, 2014 European, 2015 departmental, and 2015 regional elections) but thus far the party continues to fall at the final hurdle. The FN is not yet a party like the others.

9.5 Concluding remarks

The major developments outlined in this chapter – the decline of the PCF, the ebbing and flowing of the fortunes of the PS, the recomposition of the families of the Republican right and centre, the breakthrough of the extreme right and the varying fortunes of political ecology – reflect broader European trends observable (in part) in countries such as Italy, Austria, the Netherlands or Germany. The major political blocs in France – conservative and social-democratic – are broadly comparable to those present in comparable European countries. As in certain other European countries, however, the real dangers lie in the extent to which these blocks are challenged by political forces ambivalent towards liberal democracy. In terms of the operation of the French party system, the image of French exceptionalism no longer comes from a strong Communist party but from an assertive and visible far-right movement. The ability to manage this movement poses a new test both for the integrative capacity of the French Fifth Republic and for the welfare of liberal democratic values in French society.

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