

Conclusion

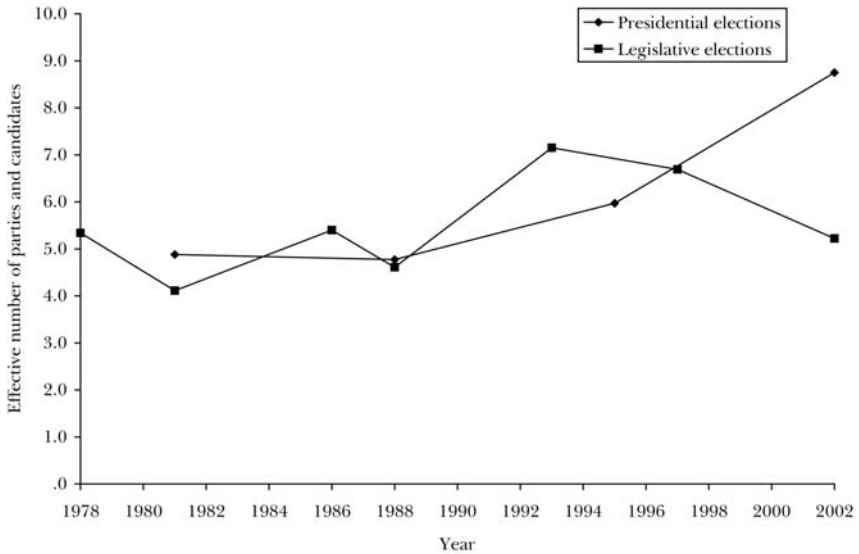
Jocelyn A. J. Evans

Looking at the French party system in 2002 in the wake of the presidential and legislative elections, it is perhaps initially tempting to see abrupt change everywhere. An apparently successful left-wing government is overturned, all its partners losing almost half their National Assembly seats or more. A fractured moderate right, led – if one can use that word – by a president weighed down by corruption scandals and coming out of a largely inactive incumbency, wins almost 70 per cent of the seats in the Assembly, and the vast majority of those under a single-party label. For the fringes of the system, the changes seem almost more abrupt than even for the mainstream. The extreme left, so visible in the presidential elections and so vital in the left's second-round absence, disappears from view once more with no seats, as does its extreme-right opposite numbers whose combined score in the presidential elections accounted for one in five French voters. In a system renowned for its larger-than-life political figures, the names of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Dominique Voynet, Martine Aubry, Charles Pasqua, Philippe Séguin and others have all been eclipsed during the last legislative term or by the elections themselves.

Yet, because of the primacy of the presidential race and the peculiarity of its first round – an unprecedented disarray of candidates and a *ballottage* unsurpassed by even the 1969 election – focus has been too tightly drawn onto the *éléments de rupture* so beloved of French political commentators, and has largely ignored the *éléments de continuité* which are in fact far more characteristic of a system which coasts blithely on from election to election, ignoring the howls for constitutional reform and fundamental rebuilding which have greeted some aspect of every result since 1959.

In drawing this book to a close, we wish to try to discern more exactly what represents continuity and what represents change. To do this, we turn first to some basic summary statistics which are commonly used to look at party system dynamics – the effective number of parties; individual and total volatility – in order to locate the 2002 party system at the end of a trend starting in 1978, the *quadrille bipolaire* benchmark year. Such

FIGURE C.1 Effective number of parties and presidential candidates in France (1978–2002)

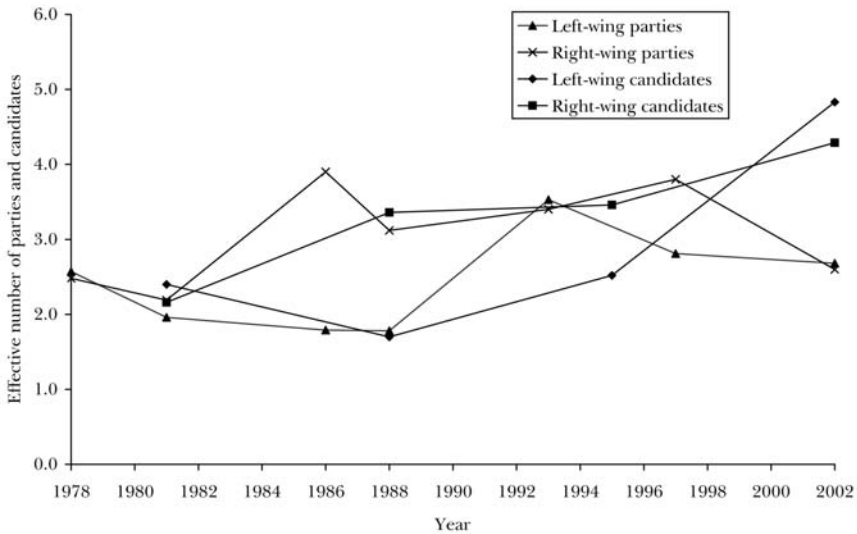


Source: Banque de Données Socio-Politiques, Grenoble, electoral archive¹

statistics by their very nature simplify depictions of reality, but this makes them an ideal means of identifying trends across time in a system if they are used cautiously. We will then turn to consider the implications of these figures for the parties, and what they reveal about the likely prospects for the French party system in coming years.

As expected, an empirical perspective to the trends in the party system clarifies the level of continuity which the system is experiencing. Figure C. 1 shows the index for the effective number of parties and presidential candidates for elections since 1978 (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989: 79).² The presidential elections show a definite trend towards greater fragmentation, with the major increase between 1995 and 2002, explained by the parties' need to field presidential candidates to ensure campaign prominence prior to the legislatives, as well as a product of the lack of decidability between the two main candidates. However, the legislative elections show what we might refer to as trendless fluctuation. The implantation of the *quadrille bipolaire* between 1978 and 1981 is followed by a rise in fragmentation in 1986 due to the appearance of the FN, and another surge in 1993 with the increase in FN and Green support. The two following elections remain stable, with a decline in the effective number of parties in 2002 due to the birth of the dominant UMP. The

FIGURE C.2 Effective number of parties and presidential candidates on the left and right in France (1978–2002)



Source: *Banque de Données Socio-Politiques*, Grenoble, electoral archive

major comparison to be made between presidential and legislative trends is clear: until 2002, the effective number of parties and candidates never differed by more than one unit, but the fragmentation of the 2002 elections was totally at odds with the party system format.

If we look at Figure C. 2, which disaggregates the presidential and legislative scores into left and right blocs, the ‘fault’ for the excessive fragmentation in the presidential elections clearly lies with the left. Granted, the right sees a steady increase in the effective number of candidates between 1981 and 2002. However, given its reputation for personality-riven politics, the increase from 3.3 in 1988 to 4.3 in 2002 is an effective increase of only one candidate. The losses in the 1980s and 1990s were clearly unrelated to an excess of supply in the right bloc. The left on the other hand blossoms from 2.5 candidates to 4.8 in 2002, almost doubling the effective number of candidates. In other words, the number of candidates standing increased, and the distribution of the vote was more equitable.

This is quite at odds with the legislative pattern. The left bloc remains relatively stable in terms of party numbers, with the exception of 1993, again due to the surge in Green support. The fragmentation of the right is far more prominent, with the FN’s presence from 1986 pushing the

quadrille bipolaire more towards a five-party format. But the pattern is clear – when the right finds itself relatively close to the left in terms of fragmentation, it wins. The obvious exception here is 1986, when the proportional representation system meant that level of fragmentation was largely irrelevant. In 2002, in particular, the offer from the UMP that could not be refused by the other right-wing parties gave the right bloc a cohesion which, together with the added value of a presidential success, an ultimately failed extreme right and a divided left, secured its landslide success. The right has thus returned to a two-party bloc, the UMP and the two ‘half-parties’ of the UDF and the FN, plus assorted stragglers.

However, it is very noticeable that the left cannot be described as irrevocably split. Indeed it is at its lowest level of fragmentation for three elections, back to its 1978 levels. The problem for the left is the domination of a Socialist Party that cannot find that all-important partner to ensure control of its own electoral space while encroaching on the centre to win the floating voters from the right. The volatility figures between 1997 and 2002 next to the actual results tell the story all too clearly (Table C.1).

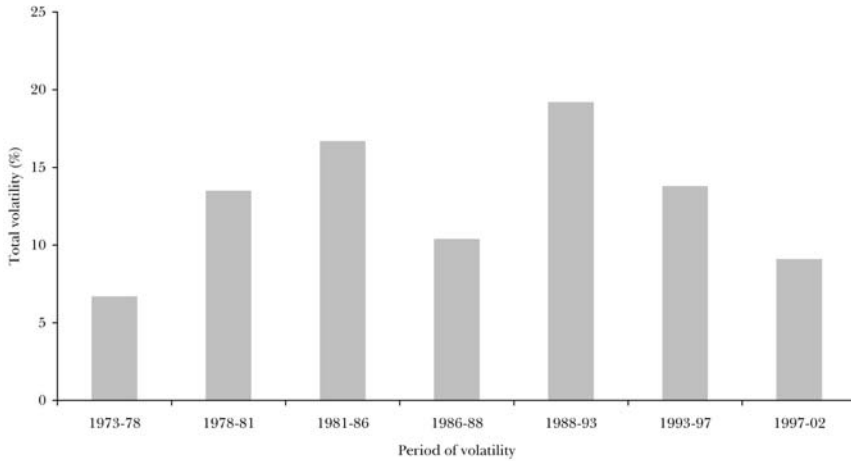
TABLE C.1 2002 legislative election results (first round) and change (1997–2002)

	<i>2002 vote</i>	<i>Change (1997–2002)</i>
Extreme left	2.80	0.23
Communists	4.90	-5.05
Socialists/radicals	25.71	0.05
Republican Pole/other left	2.27	0.09
Ecologist (Greens + others)	5.33	-1.19
UDF–RPR/UMP	38.16	8.16
Other right	5.34	0.66
FN/MNR/other ex. right	12.55	-2.68
Others	2.94	-0.17
Total	100.00	
<i>Total volatility</i>		9.14

Source: Banque de Données Socio-Politiques, Grenoble, electoral archive

In net terms, it appears that the new UMP won most of its support from extreme-right and Communist defections – an unlikely scenario in the latter case. What is more likely is that the Communist losses moved largely to the Socialists, who themselves lost centrally located voters more attracted by the cohesive presidential UMP than by the presidentially failed, fractionalised left and perhaps anxious to avoid another period of cohabitation.³ But in net terms, the Socialists lost almost no support whatsoever. What caused the left to lose by such a margin was the centripetal competitive dynamic away from the extreme left partner

FIGURE C.3 Total volatility in French legislative elections (1978–2002)



Source: Siaroff (2000: 42–3), *Banque de Données Socio-Politiques*, Grenoble, electoral archive

PCF on the left, from the extreme-right FN and MNR to the UMP, and crucially across the centre in the key area of inter-bloc competition. In these terms, a system which six months earlier had looked fragmented and which during the presidential elections had seen extremist candidates pick up a significant share of the vote, is once more displaying dynamics almost synonymous with moderate pluralism as defined by Sartori (1976) – medium fragmentation, centripetal competitive dynamics and an unoccupied central ideological space whose voters win and lose elections.

Lastly, in empirical terms, the total level of volatility is the lowest since the 1973–78 electoral period, and indeed one of the lowest in the history of the Fifth Republic (Figure C.3).⁴

The 1988 election stands out as the outlier in an otherwise relatively smooth trend in volatility. The 1986–88 right-wing government clearly made little difference to the electorate in terms of their choice – no wholesale defection to the right, no grateful return to the left, and hence the minority government of the left until 1993 when wholesale defection *did* occur. However, in the following two elections, volatility has declined despite the change in government in each case. In aggregate terms, at least, the French electorate is stabilising.

Given the findings of Andersen and Evans in Chapter 11 of this volume regarding the electorate’s stability in attitudinal terms, this is of little surprise. If post-war research into the role of policy preferences and vote has agreed on anything, it is that when underlying preferences remain stable, one would not expect high levels of voting change *ceteris*

paribus.⁵ This is not to say that changes do not occur, but that if they are significantly common, one evidently needs to look to other sources of change. In the case of the Communist Party in 2002, for instance, the five-point drop in support was partially a result of the perceived failure of the party as an influential governmental partner, as an effective representative and certainly, given Robert Hue's individual result, as the presidential party of the extreme left. Where this support goes is key. In the case of the 2002 elections, it is clear that some support moved to the Socialists, smaller proportions to the extreme left and some was lost to generational turnover among an ageing electorate – and crucially some to abstention.

For it is clear that political parties, despite predictions of their widespread demise because of policy inadequacies, corruption, failing mass-elite linkage and so on, still have *potential* electorates in society – all voting patterns and survey data support this. What parties are finding increasingly difficult to do in France, as in other countries, is to mobilise these potential electorates so that they become *actual*. Party behaviour and the electorate's reaction to this over the last twenty years demonstrate this very effectively. First, abstention is rising. Arguments over whether this is due to increasing apathy among comfortable voters or increasing disenchantment among a political and social underclass both have validity, but the proximity in social and attitudinal profiles between abstainers and the FN electorate, with the key exception of xenophobic and authoritarian attitudes, suggests that the former has greater resonance.⁶

Second, party behaviour has repeatedly played into the hands of abstention as well as losing the all important centre floating voters which allow the other bloc to win. In 1988, as we have mentioned, the left's 'victory' was a race with no winner, and suffered from a lack of mobilisation accordingly. In 1993, the Socialist Party's virtual admittance of defeat before the election, epitomised by Michel Rocard's ill-timed call for a complete overhaul of the party a couple of weeks prior to the first ballot – the infamous 'big bang' – added dispirited abstention among some supporters to defection to the right by others. In 1997, it was the right's turn to demobilise its voters both with a cynical early call for elections and an unresponsive Gaullist Party fielding an arrogant and unpopular government. Lastly, in 2002 Socialist protestations that the presidential disaster should convince left-wing supporters of the need to turn out had no visible effect whatsoever, even if the PS vote did remain stable: despite a respectable first term in office, many *gauche plurielle* voters simply failed to play their part in pressing for a second.

Third, on the rare occasion that French parties *do* get their act together, the results are usually beneficial. The combined RPR–UDF lists of 1986 would have won an even greater victory had a majoritarian electoral system been in place. In 1997, the cohesion of the *gauche plurielle* at least

in terms of candidates provided a newly humble alternative to the disasters of four years previously that could capitalise on the right's unpopularity. Similarly in 2002, the UMP behind the newly incumbent president presented the possibility of an effective and unified moderate right which for so long had been riven by personality disputes and subsequent party fragmentation. As both Sauger and Knapp have emphasised in their respective chapters in this volume, organisational differences have played a role in obstructing right unity (see Chapters 7 and 8). But as many parties have learned to their cost, such esoteric disputes are of no interest to an electorate. The only party that clearly understands this is the FN: given that its split was predicted to destroy the extreme right, Le Pen and his cohorts' exorcising of the *mégretistes* and their return to 'politics as normal' as far as possible proved to work in terms of electoral support, even if the possible Mégret bridge to the moderate right had been lost.⁷ Perhaps the Green elites' replacement of Lipietz with Mamère might be seen in a similar light.

The attempt by the Socialists to salvage some cohesion on the left by promoting the notion – although unfulfilled – of *gauche unie* candidates in 2002 suggests that both the left and the right are relearning the underlying dynamics of the Fifth Republic institutional framework. There is a common misconception in much of the literature that party system typologies and classifications somehow inexorably set the dynamics and strategies that parties will undertake in a certain system type or class. In reality, where schemas identify such dynamics, they simply indicate which dynamics are prevalent in a certain type or class and consequently which strategies may be regarded as appropriate to exploiting these. There is nothing to say that parties can or will engage in these strategies, either due to imperfect information or due to external factors which prevent them from doing so.

The early years of any regime are largely regarded as forming a learning curve for the parties within, and the Fifth Republic was no exception (Bartolini, 1984). As a number of the contributors to this volume have mentioned, the convergence on the *quadrille bipolaire*, the ideal type of moderate pluralist competition in the Republic's institutional framework, occurred principally through the balancing of the right-wing parties, the nationalisation of the Socialist Party and the centripetal shift of the Communists. Similarly, as the effective number of parties and volatility figures show, both elite and mass levels stabilised. Yet any notion of inexorable system dynamics pulling the parties towards this bipolar bloc arrangement are quickly dispelled by the late 1980s and early 1990s which, as we have seen, manifested higher volatility levels and, more importantly from a systemic perspective, growing fragmentation. This can partly be ascribed to the entry of new relevant actors, particularly the Greens and the FN. However, new parties do not

necessarily mean new poles – there is no reason *a priori* that Green parties or extreme-right parties cannot be integrated into existing blocs. What has prevented this in the French case has been splits within parties over such a possibility – the Greens hovering on the border of integration and autonomy, the FN excluded by some of the moderate right but not others, and itself split over rapprochement with the Gaullists and UDF.

Ideological divergences are most often cited as the reason for such separation, but as the chapters in this book have made clear, the extent of such divergence is largely an exaggeration by elites wanting to retain their specificity in a competitive arena. For smaller parties, merger means oblivion; for larger parties, promoting one's uniqueness remains an elite's prerogative in the fight for leadership. Yet, the experiences of both left and right from the mid-1980s onwards have shown that such stances are not only vacuous, they are often damaging in electoral terms, and no more so than in 2002. The left's conceit that somehow its eight presidential candidates all had something different to offer provided no small embarrassment when this 'diversity' led to its absence from the second round. Moreover, to criticise Jacques Chirac for only winning 19 per cent of the vote and yet still win rather misses the point: Jacques Chirac has remained remarkably stable in his vote between 1981 and 2002, always winning between 18.0 per cent and 20.7 per cent of the vote (albeit this time as the incumbent). It is the other candidates who have collapsed.

So the parties have learned that it does make sense to follow the system's dynamics and cohere even when personalities, organisations and ideologies are not necessarily conducive to this. The UMP provides the hegemonic party of the right that the UNR and its successors provided in the 1960s. The Socialists have realised that the *gauche plurielle* may have saved them from the arrogance of the 1980s but in its format to date it concomitantly promotes fragmentation which does their electoral chances no favours in the face of a cohesive right. In future, it needs to secure similar predominance on the left and try to ensure that the multifaceted candidatures or lack of electoral agreements do not sink it. But as Hanley predicts, the single party of the left – a left-wing UMP – is far from likely, given the continued rivalries and political persuasions that constitute this bloc. Whether an alliance or a single entity would be more attractive to the left electorate is unclear.

But to what extent can we expect the parties to act upon such learning where the consequences are more evident? As Knapp points out, at the time of writing DL had still not dissolved itself as promised and the UDF has no intention ever to do so. Whether the UMP proves a stable replacement for its Gaullist, DL and dissident UDF predecessors will only be shown by its founding Congress and the success of the Raffarin

government in its first incumbency. With the notable addition of the prime ministerial seat, the distribution of ministerial positions has been as equitable as in previous right-wing governments, and to this extent the smaller partners have little to complain about. Whether this is the case after the end of the honeymoon period, cabinet reshuffles and the usual round of petulant resignations remains to be seen. However, it is perhaps naïvely optimistic to think that the personality politics which have riven French parties since the Third Republic are likely to disappear as of 2002.

The key test for the right in this respect will be the future selection of Jacques Chirac's successor. Assuming that Chirac does not run for a third term, commentators have already lined up Alain Juppé as the *dauphin*, no doubt because Chirac himself sees his former prime minister and Bordeaux Mayor in this light. Whether the rest of the Gaullists, UMP and the electorate regard him as such is very much another matter. For a candidate whose lack of charisma and perceived arrogance was in no small part responsible for his government's 1997 defeat, the position of right-wing *présidentiable* looks less than assured. The likes of Nicolas Sarkozy and Philippe Douste-Blazy are unlikely to sit back and allow Juppé to inherit the presidential mantle by default. Memories of the 1974 election and the worthy but dull Jacques Chaban-Delmas' trouncing by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing after a young Jacques Chirac's betrayal inevitably spring to mind.

The left's predicament is more immediate. Despite the certain knowledge that a greater show of unity might have given them a chance of the victory in both 2002 elections, the shape that such unity should now take is unclear. The Socialists' vote remained stable in aggregate and thus its dominance is assured. The question is, who will it dominate? The PS does not have an obvious partner for a governing coalition alternative. In terms of votes, the previous *gauche plurielle* partners may only be 6.5 per cent behind the new right incumbents, but to win back this support requires offering something more persuasive than simply 'more of the same – but with weakened Greens and Communists'. The old partnership needs to be revitalised to win back centre voters and to remobilise many of those who abstained in 2002.

An obvious solution for revitalisation would be a strong *présidentiable* able to gather the remnants of the *gauche plurielle* as well as inspire electoral support. Looking at the left, however, who that candidate might be is not obvious. Some of the more charismatic left-wing leaders have been on the margins – Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Dominique Voynet, for example – and their political careers are currently in decline. Laurent Fabius and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, younger members of the old guard, are lacking in cross-party and electoral appeal and have both been damaged by scandal investigations, despite neither being convicted. Lastly

the likes of François Hollande, the Socialist General Secretary, and Martine Aubry, the mayor of Lille lack the charisma necessary for a successful presidential candidate.

But the left also faces an external threat from its extreme flank. Arlette Laguiller, Olivier Besancenot *et al.* may not have repeated their presidential success at the legislative elections, but they have less of a need to do so. Unlike the mainstream parties, the extreme left's success has come as much from the direct-action approach to politics highlighted by Wolfreys as through the ballot box (see Chapter 6, this volume). Increasingly, social movements in France are taking up the issues and complaints of the left-wing electorates in a way that political parties used to, but apparently no longer can. The risk for the left is that, as the electorate increasingly turns to such movements for issue-representation and focuses its limited political interest on these groups, the motivation to turn out for the parties of the left decreases. Granted, in the face of a hard-line right-wing government, such voters might turn out rationally in order to prevent the incumbency of a party or coalition which they perceive as pernicious. But the evidence to date is that such voters *decreasingly* perceive governing parties in such a light, rather the opposite – they do not see sufficient distinction between them. In which case, why bother voting?

That demobilisation is more a curse of the left than the right is understandable. The increasingly dominant new middle class and its traditional counterpart are less likely to belong to strata dislocated from politics and society, and conversely are more likely to feel that they have something to lose specifically from a left-wing government. The left will probably benefit more in the long term if the right engages in a confident hardline programme of business-friendly, growth-oriented policies, rather than a middle-of-the-road, socially oriented approach. Which path the right will take is currently unclear. On the one hand, the reaction to the questions of law and order and security has seen Minister of the Interior Sarkozy touring French *gendarmeries* promising increased funding. Similarly, this traditionally authoritarian right-wing approach has been matched by the initiation of income tax cuts, particularly for higher-income brackets, as promised by Chirac in his presidential manifesto. However, Raffarin himself is seen as a moderate whose appointment coincided with Chirac's wish to present an inclusive face to his 'republican' second-round electorate. Epitomising these two tendencies have been the economically liberal economic minister Francis Mer's clashes with the socially inclined social security minister, François Fillon.⁸ Which approach wins the upper hand as the incumbency progresses will have major implications for how the left chooses to oppose the government – 'we can do social liberalism better than they can' or 'hard right policies are wrong'.

In many ways, the system and political context resemble the late 1960s in France, the right strongly implanted in the presidency and government, the left about to embark upon a long period of reconstruction to allow it into power over a decade later. Commentators have predicted that the Socialists will need a long period in opposition to be able to consolidate their strength and move back into a position to challenge the right.⁹ Undoubtedly any future coalitions will be fraught by the same ideological and logistical differences which hampered the *programme commun* for so long and cost the left an earlier victory than it eventually won. Whether the cycle back to left power takes as long as predicted is a moot point – after all, the 1993 *raz-marée* proved remarkably curtailed in its after effects. That the process *is* cyclical is less in doubt. As the past twenty years have proved, the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic promotes alternation, and there is only one alternative to the right. Short of major constitutional reform, which was promised during the elections but which has now slipped down the agenda, such political cycles are destined to continue – and those parties and alternative dimensions such as Europe which currently find themselves marginalised are unlikely to find any greater saliency in future.

Overall, the French party system has displayed a number of changes since the 1990s, but these should be seen as principally conjunctural changes taking place within a relatively stable structural framework. Parties have fragmented against the competitive logic of the system and have caused the defeat of governments in elections. However, such shifts against the prevailing dynamics of the system have almost inevitably been revealed as negative in terms of electoral strategy, and the parties have reacted accordingly, albeit sometimes slowly. Where they have done so with less success, extreme parties and abstention have been the sole beneficiaries. Such continuity does not disguise the fact that the system has become host to parties which find it increasingly difficult to mobilise, let alone inspire, their electorates. An increasing tendency to ignore party politics has itself caused changes within the system. However, the electorate is still there to be mobilised. Parties which show the capacity to adapt win an electoral premium which is normally sufficiently large to ensure victory. The challenge to French parties in the twenty-first century is thus to ensure that the system does not become an elite desert where the players scabble for ever diminishing pools of voters. Parties are secure as the means of staffing government, simply because there is no viable alternative. In this respect, the notion of a crisis of parties is exaggerated. But whether such recruitment is for a mass-oriented representative government based on a social majority or a distant oligarchic institution based on a political minority depends largely on parties' focus and performance in years to come.

Notes

- 1 All figures and tables in this chapter include only the 555 metropolitan constituencies due to data availability.
- 2 The effective number of parties or candidates is calculated as the inverse of the sum of individual party votes squared. For example, in a party system with four parties, two large (40 per cent of the vote each) and two small (10 per cent each), the index would be $1/(.40^2 + .40^2 + .10^2 + .10^2) = 1/.34 = 2.94$. In a system with four equally sized parties (25 per cent of the vote each) the index would be 4.00. Thus this index takes into account both the number of parties and the distribution of the vote between them to illustrate the fractionalisation of the party system.
- 3 This is supported by a more detailed analysis of volatility at the constituency level (Abrial *et al.*, 2002).
- 4 It should be noted that volatility can also be calculated without grouping parties which have split or amalgamated. For instance, we could have calculated volatility including the UMP as a separate party, rather than an amalgamation. In this case, volatility would have been much higher. However, this would have made no real intuitive sense.
- 5 This was one of the key underlying assumptions of Philip Converse's 'normal vote', the distribution of latent party preferences among the electorate (Converse, 1966).
- 6 For an analysis of this, see Andersen and Evans (2003).
- 7 Jean Marie Le Pen is keen to play down the possible succession battle between Marine Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch, his second-in-command.
- 8 *Le Monde*, 23 July 2002.
- 9 In conversation with a member of *Le Figaro*'s political department, the author was told that the Socialists were now condemned to opposition for at least twenty years. Allowing for rhetorical hyperbole, the implication is clear.