Chapter 6

France: Stacking the Deck

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This chapter examines the two-ballot electoral system in France. The main focus is on the system used for elections to the lower house of the French parliament, the National Assembly. These elections are contested on the basis of a specific type of two-ballot system, namely a single-member, semi-closed, majority-plurality system. At the same time, France has a rather unusual political system in which the President of the Republic is a major political actor. Therefore, this chapter also refers in passing to the system used for presidential elections. This is a variant of the above system. There are four parts to the chapter. The first part identifies the origins of the two electoral systems. The second part outlines the mechanics of the French two-ballot system. The third part discusses the political consequences of the system. The fourth part addresses the seemingly perennial issue of electoral reform. There is a brief conclusion.

The origins of the current electoral systems

In June 1958, the French political system collapsed. To save the regime from the imminent prospect of martial law, General Charles de Gaulle was called upon to form a government. He agreed on condition that there would be a new Constitution. In October 1958, after being approved in a referendum, the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic came into force. In December 1958 de Gaulle was elected as the first President of the Fifth Republic, winning a landslide victory in the electoral college. In January 1959 he appointed Michel Debré as Prime Minister.

The origins of the electoral system for the National Assembly date back to the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. A two-ballot system was used for much of the period 1870-1940 during the Third Republic. However, during the Fourth Republic (1946-58) a proportional representation highest-average list-based system was used. The collapse of the Fourth Republic undermined the credibility of virtually all the institutions associated with it. As a result, when de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 electoral reform was inevitable. At this time,

Michel Debré was the gaullists' main spokesperson on institutional reform. He had long been in favour of a majority system. He believed that such systems were based on the conception of the state as an independent actor in its own right and one that could shape the party system. By contrast, he believed that proportional systems were based on a political philosophy that viewed the state as merely the sum total of the interests and groups that existed in society as a whole (Harmsen, 1988: 283). The former was entirely consistent with gaullist political philosophy. The latter was totally repugnant to it. As a result, even though Debré failed to gain support for the inclusion of either the details or the principles of the new electoral system in the Constitution (Wahl, 1959: 366-67), a shift to a majority system was inevitable. Indeed, the communists were the only major force that objected. That said, there was little support among either the public or the political class for a UK-style single-member plurality system. By contrast, there was more general support for the reintroduction of a two-ballot system. Here, though, a choice had to be made between a single-member constituency-based system and a department-based majority-list system. In the end, the General himself arbitrated in favour of the former (Duverger, 1960: 226). This decision meant that in the first election the gains made by the gaullists were likely to be considerably less than they would otherwise have been. However, it also meant that the General would not have the 'problem' of dealing with a very large right-wing majority in the National Assembly that would most likely have been in favour of Algeria remaining French (ibid.). The new system was passed by decree as a piece of emergency legislation on 13 October 1958 and the first elections were held a month later.

That said, the current system has only operated uninterruptedly since 1988. The failure to constitutionalise the electoral system in 1958, or subsequently, has meant that electoral reform is almost permanently on the political agenda in France. (See below). Article 34 of the Constitution simply states that the system of election to the National Assembly is determined by law. Thus, the system can be reformed simply by the passage of a new law. From 1958-81 inclusive, National Assembly elections were contested on the basis of the two-ballot system. However, in 1985 a department-based list system of proportional representation was introduced (Knapp, 1987). This was an extremely controversial reform (Favier and Martin-Roland, 1991: 306-15). It was one of François Mitterrand's election promises at the 1981 presidential election. However, the reform was introduced, at Mitterrand's behest, just prior to the

1986 National Assembly, at which the left was predicted to lose very badly. In the end, the left still lost, but the size of the defeat was greatly reduced. What is more, the extreme-right National Front party won 35 seats, whereas most likely it would not have won any under the old system. Immediately following the 1986 election, the right-wing majority reverted back to the two-ballot system. This reform was itself controversial because the right seemed to stand to gain the most from a return to the previous system. It was also controversial because the Minister of the Interior was accused of wanting to gerrymander the constituency boundaries to favour the right even more. In fact, the Constitutional Council limited the Minister's right to redraw the constituency boundaries and as public opinion changed the socialists won the 1988 election. As we shall see later in the chapter, the issue of electoral reform has remained politically salient. All the same, since this time, there have been no further reforms to the system of election for the National Assembly.

The situation with regard to presidential elections is more straightforward. In 1958, the situation was not considered to be right for the direct election of the President. At least in part, this was because citizens in Algeria would have been able to vote. As a result, the President was indirectly elected by an electoral college, mainly comprising local *notables*. However, in September 1962, once the Algerian issue had been resolved, a decision was taken to amend the Constitution and to introduce the direct election of the President. At this time, there appears to have been little or no discussion about whether or not to adopt a two-ballot system for presidential elections. Instead, the main element of the discussion centred on the number of sponsors required to contest the election and the rules determining participation at the second ballot (Rudelle, 1984: 705). Even then, these issues were resolved quite quickly. Moreover, since 1962, with the exception of an increase in the required number of sponsors, the system has remained largely unaltered. In part, this is because the basic details of the system were constitutionalised at the time of the 1962 reform, including the rules for participation at the second ballot. Thus, a constitutional reform is needed to change the details of the system. More generally, the system has enjoyed widespread popular and political support. Indeed, the 1993 Vedel (1993) committee on constitutional reform made no mention of reforming the basic mechanics of the system of election for the President, even though it did address a wide range of other issues.

How the electoral systems work

Elections to the National Assembly are contested on the basis of single-member constituencies. At the 2002 election, there were 577 constituencies, 555 of which were situated in metropolitan France and the remainder in France's overseas departments and territories. In metropolitan France, the department (the equivalent of UK or US counties) is the basic territorial area within which constituency boundaries are drawn. The number of constituencies per department varies according to the population of the department, but there must be a minimum of two constituencies in a department. Moreover, in any one constituency the size of the electorate should not vary by more than 20 per cent from the average size of the electorate in all the constituencies in the department. In other words, there are rules to guarantee some equality of representation, but discrepancies still remain. So, at the 2002 election, 15 departments contained just two constituencies each. By contrast, one department, Nord, contained 24 constituencies and the Paris department had 21. The number of inhabitants per constituency in metropolitan France ranged from a high of 188,200 in the second constituency of the Val d'Oise department in the Paris suburbs to a low of 34,374 in the second constituency of the Lozère department which is in a highly rural and sparsely populated area. The 1986 electoral law specified that constituency boundaries should be redrawn after every other census, in practice meaning every 20 years or so. The boundaries are proposed by the government, specifically by Minister of the Interior, and submitted to the highest administrative courts in the land for their advice (Council of State, Court of Accounts, Court of Cassation). The changes are then voted by the National Assembly.

In each constituency, elections, which are always held on a Sunday, take place according to what can be called a two-ballot majority-plurality system (Elgie, 1997). In basic terms, a candidate is elected by virtue of winning either a majority of votes at the first ballot, or, failing that, a plurality of votes at the second ballot, hence majority-plurality. More specifically, voters cast one vote. The candidates names are printed on separate pieces of paper and voters vote by dropping the name of their preferred candidate into the ballot box. At the first round, a candidate is elected if s/he wins more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast and the number of votes cast for that candidate amounts to more than 25 per cent of the registered electorate. The number of candidates elected at the first

ballot has ranged from a high of 166 at the 1968 election to a low of 12 in 1997 (www.assemblee-nationale.fr/elections/historique-3.asp - accessed 10 April 2003). In the constituencies where no candidate has been elected at the first ballot, there is a second ballot one week later. At the second ballot, only candidates who stood at the first ballot are allowed to stand again. Moreover, only those candidates who won the votes of more than 12.5 per cent of the registered electorate at the first ballot are allowed to proceed to the second. This is the sense in which the two-ballot system used for National Assembly elections is semi-closed. The contest at the second ballot is not simply a repeat of the first. In the event that only one candidate has crossed the required threshold, then the second-placed candidate may still proceed to the second ballot. In the case where no candidates have crossed the threshold, then the top two candidates may go through. In some cases, only one candidate contests the second ballot. This happens where there are only two eligible candidates and where one of them drops out immediately after the first round. This scenario does occur, but invariably it involves the situation where the candidates are from two allied parties. When it does occur, the second-placed candidate is usually the one who steps down. Whatever the situation, in the event that there are two candidates at the second ballot a simple plurality of votes is required to secure election. (For the results of the 2002 National Assembly election, see Table 6.1.)

Table 6.1 about here.

The mechanics of the presidential election system are similar to but slightly different from the system used for National Assembly elections. There is, of course, just one constituency. Again, elections are held on Sundays and, as before, voters have just one vote. In order to be elected at the first ballot, a candidate must win more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast. If no candidate does so, and none has in the history of the Fifth Republic to date, then a second ballot is held two weeks later. The presidential system differs from the National Assembly system because it is a closed run-off system. In other words, at the second ballot only the top two candidates at the first ballot are allowed to stand. Whatever the terminology, if one of these candidates decides not to contest the second ballot, and this has never happened so far, the next best-placed candidate is allowed to stand. At the second ballot, the candidate who wins the plurality of votes (which will necessarily be more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast) is elected. (For the results of the 2002 presidential election, see Table 6.2.)

Table 6.2 about here.

The political consequences of the electoral systems

The party system

In France, the two-ballot system has encouraged multi-party competition. The multi-party logic is associated with the first ballot of the election and is neatly captured by one writer:

> Given the first round does not count … every political group - and none more so the smallest and newest ones - can take advantage of the situation to 'stand and be counted', and, in so doing, they may be able to influence the largest groups (Parodi, 1978: 193).

In short, smaller parties may feel that they have nothing to lose by contesting the first ballot. On the contrary, they may stand to gain by doing so, because if they can register a sufficiently large degree of support, then they can ensure that they are indispensable to the second-round process of alliance building. (See below).

The multi-party nature of the Fifth Republic's party system is very clearly demonstrated in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. In elections from 1959-97 inclusive, the effective number of legislative parties ranged from a low of 3.3 in 1981 to a high of 5.4 in 1959 with the next highest being 5.3 in 1973 (Thiébault, 2000: 499). It is important to note that in recent years multi-party competition has been encouraged by the relatively generous form of state funding for political parties that was introduced in 1990, whereby public monies are made available to all groups that stand 50 or more candidates at a given National Assembly election. All the same, well before this date, multi-party competition was an established aspect of the Fifth Republic's political system. This is true even for the 1978 parliamentary election, which is often cited as the one where party competition was at its most simple. Here, 14 groups won more than 0.5 per cent of the vote at the first ballot and five won more than 5 per cent. (See figures in Frears and Parodi, 1979: 64. These figures assume that the Christian Democrats and Republicans were separate groups).

One factor that has affected the multi-party nature of the French two-ballot system is the threshold that candidates need to pass in order to be eligible to contest the second ballot. In 1958, the threshold was five per cent. It was then

increased to 10 per cent in 1966 and was further raised to the current level of 12.5 per cent in 1976. The raising of the threshold has penalised small parties and encouraged calls for a '*vote utile*' (see below). As Bartolini notes, it meant "the *automatic* exclusion from the second ballot of most non-left or non-majority candidates, and reduced to almost nil the blackmail potential of the minor formations" (Bartolini, 1984: 107 - his emphasis). A similar point applies to presidential elections, but in a slightly different way. In 1976, the required number of sponsors was increased in an attempt to reduce the number of candidates standing at the first ballot. This change had an immediate effect. There were six first-round presidential candidates in 1965, seven in 1969 and 12 in 1974. However, in 1981, there were only 10 candidates, while in 1988 and 1995 there were nine candidates on each occasion. Overall, these figures confirm that the two-ballot system encourages multi-party politics. For example, despite the reforms, there are still a large number of first-round presidential candidates. Indeed, in 2002 there were no fewer than sixteen. Even so, the multi-party effects of the two-ballot system can still be tempered somewhat by the introduction of seemingly innocuous institutional amendments that alter the rules of the game at either the first-ballot and/or the second-ballot.

In addition to the basic multi-party logic of the French two-ballot system, there is a separate and somewhat counter-balancing alliance-building logic. This logic is associated with the second round of the contest. At the second ballot the remaining candidates usually need to increase their first-round vote in order to win. Therefore, they have an incentive to build alliances. The alliance-building imperative of the two-ballot system has been clearly demonstrated since 1958. For example, one of the paradoxes of the early years of the Fifth Republic was that the Communist party became a more important political actor than it had been under the Fourth Republic, despite the fact that it would most likely have won more parliamentary seats had the electoral system not been changed. This is because during the Fourth Republic the non-communist left had little incentive to ally with the communists, because it was always likely to be able to form a government with the centre and/or centre-right. In the Fifth Republic, this logic did not apply. The centre-right, in the form of the gaullists, emerged as the dominant political party and was able to form a government with the support of non-gaullist centre-right groups such as Giscard d'Estaing's Independent Republicans. In this context and in isolation from each other, the two basic elements of the left, communist and non-communist, were condemned to

opposition. Gradually, though, the left accepted the logic of the system (Duhamel, 1980). In order to stand any chance of winning, they needed to co-operate. As a result, by the early 1970s the communists and the socialists had formed an electoral alliance, the union of the left. The union of the left was based on a common programme for government. More importantly, for the purposes of this chapter at least, it led to a reciprocal electoral agreement. In general terms, the two parties agreed not to compete against each other at the second ballot. In other words, if both a socialist and a communist found themselves in a position to contest the second ballot against the right, the candidate from the party which was less well placed would voluntarily stand down. This arrangement maximised the opportunity for the left-wing candidate to be elected. Indeed, it was taken one step further in 1974 when François Mitterrand stood as the candidate of the united left at the first ballot of the presidential election. He was unsuccessful, but only just and the benefits of an electoral agreement were clear. In fact, the programmatic agreement between the two parties collapsed in 1976. However, the electoral arrangement survived and has remained more or less intact ever since.

The alliance-building imperative of the two-ballot system has had a further aspect during the Fifth Republic. It has encouraged binary competition, meaning competition between just two alliances. In short, the two-ballot system punishes stand-alone parties or groups, particularly small ones. It does so as a result of a simple mechanical effect. Unless stand-alone and small parties have a strong geographical concentration, such as the regionalist parties in France's overseas departments and territories, they will find that they are unable to win through to the second ballot, or that, if they do so, they are likely to be defeated there by candidates and parties who have been able to build wide-ranging alliances. As a result, stand-alone parties and small parties are encouraged to join such alliances, unless they see a strategic reason for not doing so. More than that, the two-ballot system gives a certain encouragement to voters not to waste their vote. In this regard, it is common to hear senior politicians from large parties talking about '*le vote utile*' - literally 'a useful vote'. Indeed, this call is often made prior to the first ballot and not just at the second in the cases where more than two candidates are standing. The net effect is that the inherent multi-party logic of the two-ballot system is counter-balanced by the binary alliance-building logic that is also present. Whatever the interaction between these two strategic

incentives, there has been little room for a successful independent force under the Fifth Republic.

This point can be illustrated very clearly in the case of the centre. In the 1960s, the Christian Democrats tried to steer a third way between the right and the left. In the end, though, they chose to join the right-wing majority because by remaining outside they risked losing their remaining parliamentary seats and all chance of entering government (Elgie, 1994). This point can also be illustrated very clearly, but in a totally different way, in the case of the National Front. Since the 1980s the extreme right has refused to contemplate any alliance with the mainsteam right. (Indeed, it must be said that, for the most part, the mainstream right has also refused to contemplate any alliance with it.) As a result, though, while the extreme-right's first-ballot performance has often been very impressive, or alarming, the failure to be part of an electoral alliance has meant that its parliamentary representation has been virtually non-existent. Unlike the situation with the centrists in the 1960s, this situation has suited the National Front's strategy. The party believes that all the major forces are corrupt, including the mainstream right. More than that, elements of the National Front's electorate, and most notably its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, still harbour resentment against the gaullists because of the General's decision to negotiate Algeria's independence. Thus, any alliance with the mainstream right, including the gaullists, is impossible to contemplate. In this regard, though, as in so many others, the National Front is a case apart. Most parties that have aspired to be independent have sooner or later succumbed to the binary logic of the two-ballot system.

A further consequence of the two-ballot system is that not only has it encouraged binary competition, it has also encouraged binary competition between the left and right. As Bartolini has put it: "the party must select its political and electoral alliances ... in a way which is congruent with the second-party preference of the bulk of its electorate" (Bartolini, 1984: 117). In the Third Republic there were indeed two cross-cutting cleavages: the left/right cleavage and the confessional/secular cleavage. In this context, the two-ballot system led to complex sets of often locally-centred alliances (Elgie, 1997: 92-93). However, by 1958 the confessional/secular cleavage had disappeared. The net result is that from the very early years of the Fifth Republic the alliance-building process encouraged right-wing parties to work together and left-wing parties to do the same.

The logic of the left-right alliance-building process can be seen in the examples of both the union of the left and the disappearance of the centrists as an independent force, both of which were discussed above. A more recent example concerns the Greens. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Greens, under the leadership of Antoine Waechter, shunned any alliance with the left, refusing to accept any programmatic agreement or even a reciprocal electoral arrangement. As far as Waechter was concerned, the Greens were on neither the left nor the right. The result, though, was that the party stood no chance of winning any seats in the National Assembly, or influencing government policy. In the mid-1990s the situation changed when the party elected a new leader, Dominique Voynet. In the run-up to the 1997 parliamentary election, the Greens struck a deal with the socialists which led to a reciprocal electoral arrangement. At the 1997 National Assembly election the Greens won seven seats, their first ever, and Voynet was appointed as Minister for the Environment in the socialist-led government.

The final consequence of the electoral system on the party system is that it has encouraged centripetal left-right competition. As the old French political adage has it, at the first ballot voters select, whereas at the second they elect. To put it another way, at the first ballot voters choose, while at the second they eliminate. What both aphorisms capture is the notion that voters are motivated by different factors at the two ballots. At the first, they vote according to their basic party preference. At the second, their favoured party may be absent, so they may have to vote for the second-preference party. The net effect is that the two-ballot system has tended to reduce the support for extremes (Sartori, 1997: 65). There is no *a priori* reason why a large number of voters cannot have an extreme party as their second preference, but in France since 1958 there has tended to be a relatively normal distribution of preferences along the left/right axis. Thus, both left and right-wing alliances have tended to move towards the centre in order to maximise their electorate.

The evidence for this point is neatly demonstrated by the contrasting experiences of the communists and the extreme-right. By the early 1970s, the communists embraced the alliance-building logic of the system and were willing to form a pact with the socialists (see above). However, as early as 1974, François Mitterrand, the candidate of the united left at the presidential election, had already begun the process of distancing himself from the programmatic element of the union of the left in order to win over centrist voters. Seven years later, he

adopted the same strategy and on this occasion he succeeded. In other words, Mitterrand, the *de jure* or *de facto* leader of the left-wing alliance soon came to realise that elections were won at the centre rather than the extremes. Paradoxically, the recent success of the National Front reinforces this point. Since 1974 the National Front has regularly won between 10-15 per cent at presidential and legislative elections. More than that, the great surprise of the 2002 presidential election was that the leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, beat the main left-wing candidate, Lionel Jospin, into second place and, thus, went through to the second ballot. All the same, despite its support, the National Front has not been successful under the two ballot system. The party has returned scarcely any deputies and at the second round of the 2002 presidential election Le Pen hardly improved his first-round score. In this context, the key point is not that extreme parties have consistently won a large number of votes under the two-ballot system. After all, the electoral system is only one determinant of the reason why people vote the way they do. Instead, the point is that under such a system extreme parties have to choose either to remain marginalised and risk winning no seats or join an alliance that will fight elections at the centre and risk compromising their principles. In both cases, the threat they pose to the system is diminished. This is one of the main reasons why Sartori supports two-ballot systems generally. As he puts it, the two-ballot system "eminently facilitates governability under adverse conditions" (Sartori, 1997: 69). The Fifth Republic is a good case in point.

The parties

In France, political parties have four main characteristics (Elgie and Griggs, 2000: 99-102). Many have long-standing historical antecedents, but most have been formed relatively recently; they tend to have low membership levels and powerful local *notables*; they are highly personalised leader-centred institutions; and they are highly factionalised. In addition, French parliamentary parties exhibit two further features. Individually, they are highly disciplined; but there can be high levels of within-block competition. These characteristics are best explained by the wider institutional structures of the Fifth Republic and by the dominance of the left-right cleavage, rather than by the two-ballot system *per se*. In particular, the personality-centred aspect of political parties and the factionalised nature of party organisation are direct consequences of the

presidentialised nature of the Fifth Republic. That said, the two-ballot electoral system does relate in various ways to the other basic characteristics of French parties and their parliamentary counterparts.

The ideological and organisational origins of most French political parties date back to the 19th century or before. The classic account of right-wing parties in this regard is by Rémond (1982). That said, most parties have been formed very recently: for example, the UMP in 2002; the Greens in 1984; the centre-right Union for French Democracy (UDF) in 1978; the FN in 1972; and the Socialist party (PS) in 1969. The main reason for the seemingly continual decline and rebirth of French political parties during the Fifth Republic is the presidentialisation of the political system. The presidential contest is highly personalised. All the same, serious presidential candidates need the backing of some form of organisational structure. Thus, parties have been created as vehicles for either a movement's or an individual's presidential ambitions. For example, the PS was formed in the aftermath of the disastrous left-wing showing at the 1968 presidential election and the UMP was set up around the time of the 2002 presidential election. That said, the two-ballot process is not completely divorced from this phenomenon because it provides at least some inherent incentive for parties to split. A newly-formed party knows that even the threat that it may do fairly well at the first ballot means that it will have to be included in the general alliance-building process. Thus, two-ballot system makes the cost of party fragmentation relatively low.

The organisational weakness of French political parties and the presence of powerful local *notables* are well-established features of French political life. These features predate the introduction of the two-ballot system in the Third Republic, never mind its reintroduction in 1958. Thus, the electoral system cannot be seen as a cause of these enduring political practices. All the same, this feature of French political parties does have an effect on the operation of the two-ballot system. During the Fifth Republic, the alliance-building logic of the electoral system has been elite-centred, meaning that alliances have been negotiated by party hierarchies in Paris and imposed on the party organisations in local electoral constituencies. In this context, the power of local *notables* has sometimes made the alliance-building process more complex. For example, there may be competition between two mayors for the same parliamentary seat. If they are from different parties, then one may be reluctant to stand down and risk letting the other consolidate his/her influence within the local area. In this

context, dissident candidates (often classed as *divers gauche*, or *divers droite*) are not unheard of. It is apparent, therefore, that the presence of local *notables* can make the elite nature of the alliance-building process more difficult.

In the main, French parliamentary parties are quite well disciplined. Governments rarely lose votes as a function of dissent within the ranks of their own supporters. That said, on occasions there has been a considerable amount of within-block competition in parliament. The two-ballot system accounts for at least part of they reason why such competition occurs. In short, on occasions the multi-party logic of the system has prevailed over the alliance-building logic. For example, in the period 1976-81, there was fierce competition between the gaullists and the President Giscard d'Estaing's party, the UDF. Even though both parties were represented in government, the rivalry between Giscard and the gaullist party leader, Jacques Chirac, was intense. On this occasion, the within-block competition was so fierce because the support for both parties was approximately the same and both leaders intended to stand at the 1981 presidential election. So, while the multi-party logic of the two-ballot system means that both right and left-wing alliances are often fractious, on this occasion the level of within-block competition was even greater than usual because the stakes were so high. Indeed, a similar situation occurred in the period 1997-2002. On this occasion, the PS was the dominant party in the government and the socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, was assured of being the leading left-wing candidate at the 2002 presidential election. Even so, the relationship between the various parties in the government was sometimes fraught. On the assumption that the government would be returned after the 2002 electoral cycle, it was vital for each of the smaller parties to maximise their post-electoral bargaining power. Given that the presidential election came before the legislative election, this meant that each of the governing parties had an incentive to stand a candidate at the first round. Moreover, in the run up to the election the parties needed to differentiate themselves from each other in the hope of maximising their core electorate and winning over as many uncommitted voters and voters from within the general left-wing block. The result is well known. The plethora of left-wing candidates harmed Jospin's first-round campaign and he was beaten into second place by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The two-ballot system did not cause this situation, but it did provide a strategic context within which it occurred.

Parliament

The direct effect of the two-ballot system on the background of French deputies has been minimal, or at least there is little to distinguish the effect of this system from the effect of similar majoritarian systems. In this regard, the two most noticeable elements of the French system of representation at the National Assembly level are the interpenetration of local and national officeholders and the low level of female representation. The electoral system has little effect on the former but some effect on the latter.

In the 1997-2002 legislature, 97 per cent of all deputies simultaneously held some sort of elected office at the local level. The entrenched system of local *notables* has already been mentioned and this figure is merely another manifestation of it. In France, there has long been the expectation that powerful figures at the local level need to win representation in the National Assembly in order to maximise their influence over the political process generally. At the same time, there has been an equivalent expectation that people who are elected to the National Assembly without first having a local base need to be 'parachuted' into a position of responsibility at the local level as soon as possible. The two-ballot electoral system plays no part in creating these expectations. In this way, it is certainly true that French deputies pay perhaps more attention to constituency affairs, or more accurately to the affairs of that part of their local constituency in which they hold elected office, than their counterparts elsewhere. However, this situation is not so much a function of the electoral system as the result of more long-standing systemic features.

The area where the electoral system has had some effect is in the under-representation of women. As with most majoritarian electoral systems, the two-ballot system tends to encourage most parties to select white, middle-class, male candidates. As a result, in France the level of female representation has been relatively low. During the course of the 1997-2002 legislature, the left-wing government introduced the so-called 'parity' reform that was designed to increase the representation of women by encouraging parties to increase the number of women selected to contest winnable seats. However, at the 2002 National Assembly level it had little effect. At the outset of the 1997 legislature, 11 per cent of all deputies were women. Immediately following the 2002 election, this figure had risen to only 12 per cent (source: www.assemblee.nationale.fr /12/tribun/gs2.asp#P-1_0 - accessed 2 October 2003). This figure contrasts with

the relatively high level of female representation in the European parliament, elections to which are held under a system of proportional representations and where in the 1999-2004 legislature 43 per cent of France's MEPs were female. That said, the blame for the consistently low level of female representation in the National Assembly does not lie solely with the electoral system. As in other countries, a series of social norms and institutionalised practices means that the level of female representation is lower than it should be. Even so, the two-ballot system can be counted as one of the factors that has kept the level of female representation in the National Assembly so low for such a long time.

The government

In stark contrast to the Fourth Republic, one of the so-called 'divine surprises' of the Fifth Republic was the emergence of '*le fait majoritaire*', or majoritarianism. For most of the Fifth Republic either the left- or right-wing alliance has enjoyed majority support in the National Assembly. The reason for this situation is complex and is linked to deep-rooted social and ideological change. All the same, the two-ballot system has played a not inconsiderable part in this process. The system has produced highly disproportional electoral results, over-representing larger parties, or electoral groupings, and under-representing smaller ones. This has helped to create majority governments. That said, for the most part the system has returned coalition governments. This is a direct effect of the alliance-building logic that was discussed in the previous sub-section.

In France, the first-round result is taken as the standard indicator of party support. This is because not all seats are contested at the second round and not all candidates are allowed to stand even when there is a contest. In this context, the two-ballot system in France has produced a relatively high deviation from proportionality at virtually all National Assembly elections since 1958. (See Table 6.3). In recent times, the main victim of the system has been the extreme-right National Front. At the last four elections (1988, 1993, 1997 and 2002), the party has won 9.93, 12.87, 15.35 and 11.34 per cent of the total votes cast respectively. However, it has returned only one deputy throughout this period. This is not a coincidence. In 1986, the newly-elected right-wing government justified a swift return to the two-ballot system at least partly on the basis that the PR system had resulted in the election of a considerable number of National Front deputies and that this was a blow to the democratic foundations of the parliamentary system.

Whatever the particularities of this situation, the fact remains that the two-ballot system has always tended to produce highly disproportional results at National Assembly elections and majority governments. Indeed, since 1962, there has been only one minority government (1988-93). In short, there is a strong majoritarian logic to the two-ballot system.

Table 6.3 about here.

At the same time, though, the two-ballot system has tended to produce majority coalition governments. There was a single-party majority in the National Assembly for 10 years in the period 1958-2002 - the gaullists from 1968-73 and the socialists from 1981-86. (It should be noted that the right-wing Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) party has enjoyed this eponymous status since the 2002 legislative election). Even so, there was only one single-party majority government in the same period (1958-2002) and then for only two years - the socialist government from 1984-86. (There was also a single-party minority socialist government from 1988-93 and, again, it should be noted that the UMP has governed alone since 2002). In 1968, the gaullists won an outright parliamentary majority, but they did so at least partly as a result of the support they gained from their centre-right colleagues at the second ballot. Thus, they agreed to form a coalition government, albeit an imbalanced one in their own favour. The same situation occurred in 1981, when the socialists won with support from the communists. (This coalition collapsed in 1984, leaving the socialists in office on their own). In other words, the two-ballot system has established coalition governments as the norm, even when arithmetically they have not been necessary. What is more, for the most part these coalitions have, in effect, been agreed prior to the election. On occasions, voters have been presented with the equivalent of coalition manifestos prior to the first ballot (Thiébault, 2000: 508-12). More often than not, though, parties have fought the election merely on the basis of a reciprocal electoral arrangement (see above), or process of *désistement*. Whatever the situation, following the election, governments have usually been formed in a matter of days rather than weeks with discussions focussing on the details of portfolio allocation (ibid.: 504).

The politics of electoral reform

In France, as elsewhere, the electoral system helps to shape the process of political competition. At the same time, the choice of electoral system is itself the product of a process of political competition and nowhere is this point illustrated more clearly than in France. In the period since the beginning of modern-day French politics in 1871, the electoral system has been changed on 11 occasions. Moreover, this figure only includes major changes to the system of election to the National Assembly. Even here, it excludes less substantive but not necessarily insignificant reforms, such as the changes to the second-ballot eligibility threshold in 1966 and 1976 (see above). All in all, since 1871 there has been a new electoral system after every three elections on average!

In this context, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that governing parties have introduced reforms to suit their own interests. The switch to PR in 1985 is the most recent and one of the most blatant cases in point. Even then, the absence of any reform since the return to the two-ballot system in 1986 should not be taken as a sign that political actors have become more disinterested in this regard. For example, in autumn 1991 the socialist government prepared a new electoral bill that would have introduced a mixed system. Once again, the fact that the socialists' popularity had slumped was at least part of the motivation for addressing the issue at this time. The reform would have limited the party's losses at the upcoming contest. In the end, the absence of a parliamentary majority and divisions within the party itself meant that the reform was dropped. In addition, the right-wing majority is currently considering another reform. This time there is some discussion as to whether a maximum of only two candidates should be allowed to contest the second ballot (http://www.tf1/news/france/0,,935103,00.html - accessed 6 May 2003). On the face of it, this a relatively innocent proposal. However, it has a very political motivation. In 1997, there were 76 so-called 'triangular' second-round contests, or ones where there was a candidate from each of the left, the right and the extreme right. On this occasion, the left won 46 of these contests and right won 30. The right, though, would have gained had only two candidates been allowed to stand. In this case, the left would probably have won just 21 of these seats and the right would have won the rest (Dolez, 2002, p. 585). Thus, the suggestion that the second-round competition should be limited to only two candidates is merely another potential example of the way in which governments of the day have tried to stack the deck in their own favour. In this case, the electoral prospects of

the mainstream right would most likely be enhanced because the anti-left vote would no longer be split.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the issue of electoral reform will remain politically salient. This is partly because such changes have become almost routine in French political life. There is always an outcry when governments propose any such reform, but the electorate never seems to punish the government when a reform is introduced. The government's popularity is much more closely linked to economic issues than institutional engineering. It is also partly because there are few obstacles to electoral reform. There is no constitutional limitation and only a parliamentary majority is required. That said, in the foreseeable future at least, the issue of substantive electoral reform is more likely to exercise the minds of the left than the right. This is because the right is now dominated by one large party. This party stands to gain from the two-ballot system, so there is little incentive for it to support any major change. By contrast, the left is divided. The Socialist party is poorly placed to win an outright majority by itself. Thus, it needs partners. This is ineluctable logic of the Fifth Republic. In particular, it needs the support of the Greens and the Communist party, even if the latter is a wasting asset. These parties, most notably the Greens, would benefit from the introduction of even a dose of proportionality. Thus, a commitment to electoral reform may be part of any left-wing alliance in the coming years. More than that, given there is now what amounts to a single large party on the right, the socialists have more of an incentive to agree to such a demand than before because it may serve as a way of reducing the long-term prospects of right-wing dominance. Once again, though, the issue of electoral reform needs to be placed in a wider context. The socialists may prefer to propose a more general reform of the Fifth Republic's political system. Indeed, the idea of a Sixth Republic has more support on the left now than at any point for 30 years or more. In this scenario, a reform of the system of election to the National Assembly may not necessarily be part of the package. Alternatively, the socialists may propose electoral reform, but only for second-order elections. There is plenty of room to reform the system of election to the Senate in a way that would benefit potential allies. What is more, the right has only just changed the system of election to regional councils, decreasing the level of proportionality. This creates a new bargaining space on the left in this regard. Whatever the scenario, when it comes to electoral reform in France, the bottom line is 'watch this space'.

Conclusion

The two-ballot majority-plurality system has helped to shape the political system of the Fifth Republic as we know it today. The regime's predecessor, the Fourth Republic, was beset by weak coalition governments that changed on average every six months. The situation under the Fifth Republic has been very different. The tendency towards coalition government has been maintained. More importantly, though, the Fifth Republic has seen the emergence and institutionalisation of the so-called '*fait majoritaire*', or majoritarianism. The two-ballot electoral system has been instrumental in this development. True, the multi-party logic of the first ballot has meant that the composition of the majority has sometimes been quite heterogeneous. For example, certain right-wing governments have been conglomerations of ideologically consistent, but organisationally competitive groups. Even so, in the French context the very existence of stable majority governments is a significant development and, furthermore, one that the gaullist architects of the 1958 Constitution were determined to achieve. It must be remembered, though, that the introduction of the two-ballot majority-plurality electoral system in 1958 was only one of a series of intitutional reforms. Moreover, the introduction of the new electoral system at that time took place in the context of fundamental social change. At that time, these changes reinforced the effects of the two-ballot system and accelerated the tendency towards majoritarianism. Overall, since 1958 the French experience has confirmed the basic insight that the two-ballot system belongs to the family of majority systems. All the same, it has also suggested that the impact of the system is sensitive to wider institutional and social factors and perhaps more so than other electoral systems.

Table 6.1 Votes at the first round of the 2002 French National Assembly election and seats following second-round results

Party/political affiliation	Votes	First-round vote (%)	Seats after the second round	Seats
Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (Union for the Presidential Majority - since renamed Union for a Popular Majority - centre-right)	8,408,023	33.3	355	61.5
Parti socialiste (Socialist party)	6,086,599	24.1	140	24.3
Front National (National Front - extreme right)	2,862,960	11.3	0	0.0
Union pour la Démocratie française (Union for French Democracy - centre right)	1,226,462	4.9	29	5.0
Parti communiste (Communist party)	1,216,178	4.8	21	3.6
Verts (Greens)	1,138,222	4.5	3	0.5
Divers droite (right)	921,973	3.7	9	1.6
Chasse Pêche Nature Traditions (Hunting Fishing Nature Traditions)	422,448	1.7	0	0.0
Parti Radical de gauche (Left-Radical party)	388,891	1.5	7	1.2
Ligue Communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League, extreme left)	320,467	1.3	0	0.0
Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle - extreme left)	301,984	1.2	0	0.0
Pôle Républicain (Republican Pole)	299,897	1.2	0	0.0
Other ecologists	295,899	1.2	0	0.0
Mouvement National Républicain (National Republican Movement - extreme right)	276,376	1.1	0	0.0
Divers gauche (general left)	275,553	1.1	6	1.0
Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France - right)	202,831	0.9	1	0.2
Divers (Other)	194,946	0.8	0	0.0
Démocratie Libérale (Liberal Democracy - centre right)	104,767	0.4	2	0.4
Rassemblement pour la France (Rally for France - right)	94,222	0.4	2	0.4
Extreme left	81,588	0.3	0	0.0
Regionalists	66,240	0.3	1	0.2
Extreme right	59,549	0.2	0	0.0

Source (adapted): www.assemblee-nationale.fr/elections/resultats.asp - accessed 28 April 2003

Table 6.2 The results of the 2002 French presidential election

Candidate (party/political affiliation)	Votes	First round (%)	Second round (%)
Jacques Chirac (Union for the Presidential Majority)	5,665,855	19.9	82.2
Jean-Marie Le Pen (National Front)	4,804,713	16.9	17.8
Lionel Jospin (Socialist party)	4,610,113	16.2	
François Bayrou (Union for French Democracy)	1,949,170	6.8	
Arlette Laguiller (Workers' Struggle)	1,630,045	5.7	
Jean-Pierre Chevènement (Republican Pole)	1,518,528	5.3	
Noël Mamère (Greens)	1,495,724	5.3	
Olivier Besancenot (Revolutionary Communist League)	1,210,562	4.3	
Jean Saint-Josse (Hunting Fishing Nature Traditions)	1,204,689	4.2	
Alain Madelin (Liberal Democracy)	1,113,484	3.9	
Robert Hue (Communist)	960,480	3.4	
Bruno Mégret (National Republican Movement)	667,026	2.3	
Christiane Taubira (Left-radicals)	660,447	2.3	
Corinne Lepage (right-wing ecologist)	535,837	1.9	
Christine Boutin (pro-life)	339,112	1.2	
Daniel Gluckstein (extreme-left)	132,686	0.5	

Source (adapted): www.elysee.fr/pres/elecpr1_.htm - accessed 29 April 2003

Table 6.3 Deviations from proportionality in National Assembly elections, 1958-1997 (Least Squares index)

Election	LS
1958	21.2
1962	15.0
1967	10.0
1968	19.2
1973	11.0
1978	6.6
1981	16.0
(1986 PR)	7.2
1988	11.8
1993	25.0
1997	17.8
2002	21.9

Source: Communications from Arend Lijphart and Michael Gallagher

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