This chapter is the first of two which are concerned with the aspects of French politics that are most immediately and obviously visible to the observer, whether that observer is French, or an outsider. It is in the act of voting that citizens in democratic countries are most conscious of their role as individuals in political life. France has for most of the period since the war had a high rate of participation in voting, despite the multiplicity of types of election – for local councils at commune, département and since 1986 regional level, for the National Assembly, the European Parliament, and the Presidency and, from time to time, in referenda. It has been said that French political life exists in a state of permanent campaigning, and indeed there seem to be few months when an election is neither forthcoming, and the subject of debate and campaigning, nor just completed and hence the subject of analysis and associated triumph and recrimination. In this respect the early 1990s was highly unusual, for there were no elections in 1990 or 1991.

Electoral campaigning nowadays requires funds and organisation. It is rare indeed, at levels above the most purely local, for an individual to stand for, let alone win, an election on the strength on his or her own personality and ideas alone. Electoral success tends to depend upon a party organisation. Shared convictions, ideas and approaches about the shape which society should take and the policy approaches that are required to bring into reality a common vision of a better future normally hold together the adherents of any particular party. Theorists regard them as a means by which the
desires, preferences and aspirations of citizens can be aggregated into a form which will enable them to be transformed into action. In France, however, there are important qualifications to be made to the general theories. Individuals may have important parts in political life because of who they are, not what they believe or which organisation they belong to. Political parties may arise principally out of shared support for a particular leader rather than out of strongly held and coherently formulated beliefs. Loyalties to particular party groupings may not be seen as very compelling or constraining. Political debate revolves around discussion of moral principles and broad ideas, and also about very specific personalities. Party programmes and manifestos are often, though not always, slight and vague.

The origins of many of these characteristics lie in the developments and cleavages described in Chapter 1. This chapter goes on from there to consider in more detail the ideological and personal factors that lie at the root of the structure of political parties that is found in France. The way in which this structure developed in the post-war years is then considered. The final section of the chapter is concerned with the way in which the development of the Fifth Republic has shaped the present party system. Chapter 9 discusses the fortunes of the individual parties within the Fifth Republic.

Types of Political Parties in France

During the first half of the twentieth century the overall structure and nature of the French party system was distinctive. Not only was the party system a multi-party system, as opposed to the broadly two-party systems of Britain and the United States,¹ but there was a great variety of internal organisation and structures within the parties themselves.

Byron Criddle identifies a number of characteristics of the French system before the 1960s. These characteristics led, as he points out, to a failure, on the part of the French parties, to perform the normal functions of parties in liberal democratic states.² Hague and Harrop argue that there are five such functions:

- to provide links between the rulers and the ruled, especially to facilitate the flow of political communication