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French Parties and Parity in Context

Introduction

The French ‘parity’ law has a specific history and context which underpin the issues explored in the remainder of the book relating to the law’s implementation. Similarly, the actors involved in the law’s passage and implementation – France’s political parties – are diverse in a number of ways that are relevant to the analysis of gender parity. This diversity influenced both the initial passage of the ‘parity’ law and the willingness and ability of each party subsequently to meet the requirements of parity.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the French party system and the six main parties within the system which are studied in this book. The history, current situation and ideological positioning of each party, along with the dynamics of the French party system, all help shape each party’s available options, thus illuminating the analysis provided in subsequent chapters. It is also necessary to understand the circumstances under which parity arose, given both the particular national context of parity and the broader international context of gender quotas. The pressure under which parties found themselves to introduce a law which they did not all support is important in explaining both why the law was passed and why it contained so many loopholes. The seemingly contradictory legislation which resulted, and the subsequent disregard shown for the law by some parties, can be better understood when considering party motivations. Although the actions of parties appear inconsistent, with varying levels of enthusiasm for gender parity, their underlying motivations reveal a more consistent, pragmatic approach.
The French party system

France is often referred to as having a distinctive party system known as ‘bipolar quadrillism’. At its peak, the party system formed two distinct blocks of two parties each – the PCF and PS on the left, and the UDF and Gaullists on the right. The ‘bipolar’ characteristic is a product of the electoral system, with elections being held over two rounds, encouraging a proliferation of parties in the first round and a left-right stand-off in the second round. With no party large enough to dominate on the left or the right, cooperation between the two major parties on either side produced the infamous quadrille.

Over time, this description has become increasingly inaccurate as new parties have entered the party system. The two major new players are the Greens (les Verts), who originally defined themselves as being outside the left-right spectrum but eventually joined the block on the left; and the FN, who have stolen votes from both left and right and continue to be a disruptive influence to the bipolar system. Moreover, the unity of each block has waxed and waned over the years. The left won the election of 1997 by uniting its various parties under the umbrella of the ‘gauche plurielle’ (plural left), while the parties of the right appeared divided. However, by 2002 these roles had reversed and a new, unified party of the right emerged in the form of the UMP, while the growing divisions on the left led to the collapse of the gauche plurielle. The UMP combined the Gaullist RPR party with smaller right-wing parties, as well as absorbing a significant portion of the UDF. The disintegration of the UDF was compounded in 2007, when most of the party shifted its loyalties to the UMP and changed its name to the Nouveau Centre. Those who remained loyal to the party’s leader, François Bayrou, regrouped under the name MoDem.

The waxing and waning of party fortunes is another feature of the French party system. In the period 1978–2002, no party succeeded in winning a second term of office. Instead, the French electorate changed their mind at each election, leading to alternance – the replacement of each successive government with the opposition, resulting in each party enjoying a period of relative success followed by a period of relative decline followed by a revival in fortune, and so on.

A third distinctive feature of the French party system is the changing nature and number of parties present. Although the number of parties capable of winning seats in Parliament is fairly limited, a large number of parties exists at the margins thanks to the two-round electoral system which allows the French electorate to vote with their heart in