Review Article

French Politics: the Virtues of Majoritarian Democracy

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France, i.e. the French Republic IV and Republic V, is a true test case for institutional analysis. It may be seen as a crucial experiment testing some implications of the adherents (Duverger) and the adversaries (Lijphart) of Majoritarian democracy. This question is studied through an institutional evaluation of whether the Fifth Republic has performed better than the Fourth Republic. We use two research strategies to throw light upon the question: (1) Longitudinal evaluation of France from 1945 to the late 1990s; (2) Cross-sectional evaluation of the French semi-presidential system, comparing France to other democratic regimes, presidential or parliamentary during the 1990s. Our findings suggest that France under the Fifth Republic has shown that Majoritarian democracy can be made workable in terms of all the requirements of a constitutional democracy.

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Introduction

French politics has not lost any of its strong flavour. It is full of surprises all the time including stunning reversals as well as unexpected events. Where does this democratic vitality come from? In no other democracy are the people so prepared to show their political preferences so openly. In particular, is French politics shaped by its institutions or by its culture? If Montesquieu arrived in Paris today to write *French Letters*, what would he underline as the essence of French politics (Elgie and Griggs, 2000; Guyomarch *et al.*, 2001)? French political institutions are biased towards centralization and uniformity. The emphasis on equality is a standard feature of French political culture, which is dominated by civic republicanism and which is contested only by old-fashioned nationalism. Can France cope with the social heterogeneity that is induced by globalization? The capacity of French politics to muddle through is better than institutional theory claims, especially the consensual theory of democracy.

We can approach the study of French politics by way of an institutional framework in which the emphasis is upon the performance of political institutions. In fact, it is possible to view the French polity as a critical experiment in the evaluation of institutional theory. According to one theory, France should be politically stable, since it contains power-concentrating institutions (Duverger, 1996). However, on the basis of consociational theory, which emphasizes power-sharing institutions, proportional representation (PR) and over-sized government coalitions, France should not perform as well as other continental European democracies (Lijphart, 1999). Which theory is correct? Do the pros of majoritarian democracy outweighing the cons, or *vice versa*?

That said, French politics is more than just a set of institutions. French political culture has long since fascinated foreign analysts and the impact of republicanism on political outcomes must be recognized. To separate the impact of institutions from the impact of culture a research strategy is required. To this end, a methodology for analysing the relative importance of institutional and cultural effects will first of all be outlined. Then, the performance of the French political system in the light of the Duverger–Lijphart controversy will be evaluated. More precisely, the performance of the post-war political systems will be tested, given that the Fourth Republic was a PR-democracy, whereas the Fifth Republic is a majoritarian democracy. Which democracy performs best?

Evaluating the Performance of Political Systems

In economics, the indicators by which economic performance can be evaluated are standard. In political science, no such agreement exists about what sort of indicators should be used to evaluate the performance of a polity, even if this does not hinder scholars from engaging in such evaluations all the time, often implicitly. In fact, the criteria for evaluating political performance will be different as a function of whether we are evaluating local and regional government, the national polity, intergovernmental bodies or international organizations.

We suggest that the following macro-criteria are relevant in an evaluation of the French political system:

- (a) human rights record,
- (b) constitutional longevity,
- (c) government duration,
- (d) electoral volatility,
- (e) party system fractionalization and
- (f) social unrest.

If we know the profile of a country from (a) to (f), then we can draw a reasonably accurate political portrait of a country. We wish to argue that these are the criteria that should figure prominently in the evaluation of political systems. A tricky methodological problem concerns the value-ingrained nature of these criteria. They constitute indicators on political instability in a broad sense. Thus, a low human rights rating is a good indicator of the lack of democracy. Numerous constitutional revisions or changes indicate a lack of state institutionalization or state firmness. The occurrence of short-lived administrations indicates profound governmental problems in a country. It is only when a certain threshold has been passed that party fractionalization, voter volatility and strikes and political protests become a threat to the survival of the political system. When this point occurs, some may even wish the system to collapse. In other words, values matter in the evaluation of political institutions.

However, while still a value-laden topic, institutional performance is not an arbitrary exercise where anything goes (Lakatos *et al.*, 2000). In order to determine whether different political institutions promote particular outcomes, a research strategy that specifies the models and the data set to be employed needs to be established. Thus, we need to state explicitly which hypotheses are to be tested, how variables have been measured and what data set is being referred to in the empirical analysis. In order to handle the interaction between variables regression analysis can be used. This is the basic method for undertaking controlled experiments in the social sciences.

The issue at stake here is the relative performance of the French Fourth and Fifth Republics. The question is whether the latter has performed better than the former. We will use two research strategies to throw some light on this question: (1) A longitudinal evaluation of France from 1945 to the late 1990s; (2) a cross-sectional evaluation of the French semi-presidential system, comparing France to other democratic regimes, presidential and parliamentary, during the 1990s. The key variables employed here are listed in Appendices 1 and 2.

We test two hypotheses:

- (H1) The Fifth Republic has performed better than the Fourth Republic.
- (H2) The Fifth Republic performs better than the average presidential regime.

If we can show that the Fifth Republic has done better than the Fourth Republic, then we can ask second whether the Fifth Republic does better than the average presidential regime. In this latter case, any difference in performance may be attributed to French political culture, the understanding of which requires specific knowledge of the French. The virtues and the vices of the Fifth Republic are, in our view, tied up with the general appreciation of

majoritarian institutions and the kind of politics they endorse — adversarial politics. Let us look at two commensurable, but contradictory theories.

The Duverger–Lijphart Controversy

In the institutional literature in political science, there is an interesting contradiction between two opposite hypotheses about the consequences of alternative election formulas. This issue has never been resolved, as the adherents of majoritarian election formulas (M) keep opposing the supporters of PR. Although several of the major comparative and social choice scholars have taken a stand on this issue, the debate is best captured by referring to the work of Maurice Duverger and Arendt Lijphart.

Duverger is the pro-majoritarian theoretician *par excellence*. ‘Duverger’s Law’ was formulated in the period immediately after the Second World War and predicted that M-institutions work better than PR institutions in a democracy because it leads to a two-party system, which is conducive to government stability and efficacy. In the literature on electoral systems, there has been a great deal of discussion about Duverger’s Law. What we can say is that Duverger predicts that the Fifth Republic will perform better than the Fourth Republic. Evaluating the performance of the two Republics is equivalent to testing Duverger’s law.

The supporters of PR state their case in an equally unambiguous manner. PR, they say, leads to fair political representation that stabilizes politics. Thus, it is argued that political systems based upon PR perform better (Powell, 2000). In fact, this fact is hardly surprising, given that non-democratic regimes tend to employ M systems. In 1990, 67 per cent of the PR-countries were democracies, while only 15 per cent of M-countries were democracies. However, this does not mean that PR is better than M when a country is safe for democracy.

In Lijphart’s work PR is a key element of his preferred type of democracy: consensus democracy. Lijphart has stated for a long time that consensus democracy performs at least as well or even better than Westminster-style democracy, which is basically an extreme form of majoritarian democracy (Lijphart, 1999). Although Lijphart focuses in particular upon the possibility of creating grand coalitions out of PR, his rejection of majoritarian democracy goes against Duverger’s logic. Who is right, Duverger or Lijphart, when it comes to the pros and cons of M-democracy? Let us take French politics as the test case.

A critical experiment makes it possible to decide between two opposing scientific theories. When two theories about the same thing predict contrary results for a given situation, the critical experiment decides in favour of one

theory against the other. According to Francis Bacon, such an experiment is sometimes decisive. By contrast, Popper argued that the most such an experiment can do is falsify one of the theories, whereas Lakatos held that they are never ultimately decisive. Be that as it may, French politics may be taken as a critical experiment for evaluating the relative performance of PR- and M-democracies. The strength of M is political decisiveness. The electoral outcomes of M allow a government to conduct a coherent policy over a long period of time. The strength of PR is political inclusiveness. It allows all groups to have a voice. Which is better, political decisiveness or political inclusiveness? In other words, which polity performs best on the basis of a number of criteria?

Performance Evaluation

France, under the Gaullist set of institutions, is as majoritarian a polity as there can be. Its election system displays very high disproportionality and the district magnitude is very low (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). It is a centralized unitary state with a very strong executive, asymmetrical bicameralism and weak legal review. If Duverger is right, France should do better under the Fifth Republic than the Fourth. If Lijphart is right, then the opposite should be the case.

Test 1

Table 1 has the information that is necessary to determine the relative performance of the Fourth and Fifth Republics. Here, we rely on data covering a reasonably long time series going from around 1950 up to the late 1990s. The figures for the Fourth Republic correspond to the period 1950–1957, while the figures for the Fifth Republic (V) correspond to the rest of the period. In addition, figures for the Fifth Republic are divided into the early period (V: 1 from 1958 to 1974) and a later period (V: 2 from 1975 to the late 1990s).

The finding that the Fifth Republic does better than the Fourth Republic comes as no surprise. The Fourth Republic scored high on democracy but low on the other indices. The fundamental difficulty was the profound government instability. The institutions of the Fifth Republic undoubtedly changed this situation. Thus, government stability increased sharply with the introduction of majoritarian institutions at the expense of a reduction in the score for democracy. Party fractionalization was reduced by the majoritarian rules, but not as much as might be expected because of the special nature of French party system with its many alliances that can cooperate strategically in the second round of elections. Social instability has come down under the Fifth Republic.

Table 1 Evaluation of IV and V French Republics: comparing means

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>V:1</i>	<i>V:2</i>	<i>Etasq 1</i>	<i>Etasq 2</i>
<i>Democracy indexes</i>						
Przeworski	1	1	1	1	0.000 (1.00)	0.000 (1.00)
Polity	10.0	7.6	6.7	8.3	0.466 (0.000)	0.756 (0.000)
Vanhanen	32.6	27.1	18.2	32.9	0.047 (0.124)	0.561 (0.000)
<i>Government stability</i>						
Durability	10.1	34.3	36.1	32.8	0.363 (0.000)	0.366 (0.000)
Number of months	6.1	20.3	21.6	19.2	0.358 (0.000)	0.362 (0.000)
Government crises	2.9	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.641 (0.000)	0.656 (0.000)
Cabinet changes	1.6	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.315 (0.000)	0.317 (0.000)
<i>Electoral stability</i>						
Fractionalization (a)	0.825	0.793	0.798	0.790	0.063 (0.407)	0.070 (0.695)
Fractionalization (b)	0.838	0.706	0.650	0.751	0.180 (0.003)	0.330 (0.000)
Volatility	12.9	13.3	14.4	12.4	0.001 (0.923)	0.020 (0.888)
Turnout	80.6	74.9	77.6	72.6	0.186 (0.109)	0.318 (0.101)
<i>Social stability</i>						
Riots	2.5	1.7	2.8	0.9	0.017 (0.384)	0.163 (0.022)
Anti-government	0.9	2.1	1.8	2.3	0.046 (0.153)	0.057 (0.283)
General strikes	1.5	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.076 (0.063)	0.093 (0.124)
Work days lost	36.5	21.3	40.9	8.3	0.075 (0.060)	0.571 (0.000)

Sources: Appendix 1.

Of course, it is always possible to claim that the Fourth Republic faced an exceptional set of circumstances, in that it had to operate in an extremely hostile environment including extreme party polarization as well as the French colonial collapse. Thus, the comparison, it might be argued, is flawed.

Test 2

We will, thus, do another test that evaluates the performance of the Fifth Republic on the basis of a regression model where the parameters are estimated using the entire world of democracies. The result of the second test is to be interpreted such that if the actual (or observed) score for France is better than its predicted score, then French political culture matters besides French political institutions.

Does the Fifth Republic do better than truly comparable cases? Following Lijphart, the prediction is that France should perform worse than countries with non-majoritarian institutions. On the other hand, following Duverger, the prediction would be exactly the opposite one. Which countries are comparable to France in terms of institutional performance, all other things being equal? It is the *ceteris paribus* clause which is so critical in the critical experiment.

Let us look at a set of presidential regimes and enquire into whether France does better or worse than the average system, France being classified as semi-presidential. Table 2 has the regressions predicting the implementation of human rights from the executive as well as affluence as the key control variable, given that many presidential countries are Third World countries. It also looks at the impact of the electoral system controlling in that model for corruption. Finally, it tests a third model comprising unitarism and state institutionalization.

The observed scores for France are higher than the predicted ones indicating that France does better than the average presidential regime as well as better than the average majoritarian country. The high score on democracy for France may reflect its special political culture, civic republicanism, which strongly endorses an anti-authoritarian ideology. The length in time of the modern French state — the Napoleonic legacy — is also a positive element for French democracy.

Test 3

Consociational theory started out as a set of hypotheses about political instability. However, it has recently been broadened into a general theory of performance linking political outputs and outcomes with political institutions.

Table 2 Democracy (human rights) and institutions

<i>Dependent variable: democracy scores 1995–2001</i>						
<i>Predictor variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>	
	<i>Coeffs</i>	<i>t-stat</i>	<i>Coeffs</i>	<i>t-stat</i>	<i>Coeffs</i>	<i>t-stat</i>
Presidentialism	–0.516	–2.40	—		—	
Affluence	1.283	7.54	—		—	
Electoral system	—		1.539	4.57	—	
Corruption	—		–0.594	–8.21	—	
Federalism	—		—		0.263	0.41
State age	—		—		0.026	7.15
Constant	–2.97	–1.72	9.561	19.10	3.416	8.82
Adj rsq	0.462		0.539		0.268	
<i>N</i>	123		104		149	
	Observed	Predicted	Observed	Predicted	Observed	Predicted
France	9.25	8.78	9.25	7.60	9.25	8.72

Sources: Appendix 2.

Table 3 Electoral systems and economic performance: the OECD set of countries

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Coeffs</i>	<i>Dependent variables</i>					
		<i>Social spending</i>	<i>Unemployment</i>	<i>Inflation</i>	<i>Economic growth</i>	<i>Misery 1</i>	<i>Misery 2</i>
Electoral system	Coeff	4.865	−0.063	0.899	0.728	7.538	−2.090
	<i>t</i> -stat	2.11	−0.03	0.75	1.21	0.55	−0.15
Affluence	Coeff	1.930	—	—	—	—	—
	<i>t</i> -stat	0.38					
Public sector	Coeff	—	0.031	0.022	−0.088	0.283	−0.791
	<i>t</i> -stat		0.23	0.30	−2.39	0.33	−0.90
Constant	Coeff	0.046	6.524	1.702	5.186	6.230	13.992
	<i>t</i> -stat	0.01	1.20	0.57	3.43	0.27	0.39
Adj rsq		0.10	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.03	0.00
<i>N</i>		23	23	23	23	23	23
France	Observed	30	11.1	2.0	1.2	22.7	−21.2
	Predicted	19	8.2	2.9	0.5	24.2	−27.8

Sources: Appendix 2.

Thus, it predicts that power-sharing countries perform better than countries in which power is concentrated. Let us test this prediction with regard to France.

The narrow institutional hypothesis links political institutions with political stability, predicting that PR countries are more stable or democratic than majoritarian countries. As we have seen, this is not true in relation to France. The broader institutional hypothesis links political institutions with a wider set of socio-economic outcomes, although it should be noted that there is little support in economic theory for any such link between PR or majoritarian institutions and economic outcomes. Table 3 predicts various socio-economic outcomes from one key property of the electoral system, disproportionality, together with affluence and public-sector size as a control variable, limiting the set of cases to the OECD countries.

PR institutions have only one corroborated impact upon socio-economic outcomes, namely increased social spending. Consociationalism has no impact whatsoever upon economic growth, inflation, unemployment or any combined index of economic misery. Interestingly, France is closer to PR-democracies than M-democracies when it comes to social spending. Where does the support for the French welfare state come from? France is proud of its so-called *republicanism* according to the definition of Charles Renouvier (Blais, 2000). Although it is difficult to determine the precise content of this concept, which is shared by almost all parties in France, it seems reasonable to suggest that it combines individualism (human rights) with nationalism (social rights). Thus, France displays a higher social ambition than predicted from the model, which is a result of the workings of republicanism. At the same time, even though French political culture is distinctly collectivistic in tone, it remains true that France is deeply committed to the market economy, or free enterprise capitalism. The French economy has not performed worse than the average M-democracy.

To conclude: we cannot corroborate anything in relation to the negative consequences about M-democracies.

M-Democracy and Post-modernity

Instead, let us see if we can confirm a more positive argument about this type of democracy. Two outcomes are highly relevant from the Duverger perspective, namely government duration and electoral volatility. Both of these outcomes should be promoted by M-democracies and both in turn enhance the vitality of democracy.

In post-modern society, based on multiculturalism, mobility and the floating nature of citizen allegiances, politics can only give direction to democracy if elections present clearcut choices between policies and elections result in

governments capable of ruling the country within the framework of the rule of law. This is the essence of French politics under the Gaullist set of institutions. These rules of the game maximize political decisiveness, which is what democracy needs in the post-modern stage.

France is post-modern in the sense that it is secular. As Figure 1 shows, France has a secular political culture where religiosity is weak. The religious cleavage that played such a prominent role in French history matters little today.

French society is multicultural. As Figure 2 shows, immigrants now constitute almost 8 per cent of the population. The increase in multiculturalism has not only formed the background for the emergence of French populism and neo-nationalism in the shape of Le Pen and Mégret. In addition, and what tends to be neglected, is that multiculturalism has also reinforced the special feature of French political culture, namely its republicanism.

The integration of immigrants constitutes *the* challenge for French society and government policy, especially the integration of large Muslim groups. As Figure 3 shows, the extent of intermarriage has gone down somewhat recently, but France is not a stalled society.

Post-modernity calls for another kind of politics than modernity. Instead of the deep-seated cleavage between capital and labour, which dominated French politics during the 20th century, the post-modern society is a floating society with multiple and transitory allegiances. In this context, democratic politics benefits from M-democracy institutions, as they enhance government decisiveness, issue transparency and power alteration.

Figure 1 Church attendance in France 1970–1998. *Note:* Church attendance has been estimated as those attending church at least once a week as a percentage of all respondents. *Source:* Eurobarometers from 1970 to 1998.

Figure 2 Foreign and immigration population (in per cent) in France from 1911 to 1999. *Source:* Based on census data as reported in Boëdieu and Borrel (2000), and Daguet and Thave (1996).

Figure 3 Intermarriage in France 1970–1997 (in per cent). *Note:* Intermarriage stands for marriages between a French person and a foreigner. *Sources:* Muñoz-Perez and Tribalat (1984) as well as volumes of INSEE (various years) Table B.02-10.

The key challenge for democracy in a post-modern society is not power-sharing but democratic vitality (Tingsten, 1965). A democracy can only keep the interest of its citizens if it focuses on a few key issues and includes institutions that promote clear-cut policy choices as well as transparent decision-making. M-democracy scores high on democratic vitality. This is the charm of French politics, which always has a plot like a thriller.

Conclusion

No civilized country can opt out of democracy. Politics is about power and people will not support institutions that result in decisions that do not derive their ultimate legitimacy from the popular will. Why hand over power to a government that is separated from The General Will? However, accepting, thus, the first element in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, do we also accept the second element: republicanism, unitarism and majoritarianism?

Recent democratic theory promotes an alternative model of democracy, consensus or consociational democracy. Understanding French politics entails moving towards a new appreciation of Rousseau's democracy. Under the Fifth Republic France has shown that M-democracy can be made workable in terms of all the requirements of a constitutional democracy. It has shown that a political system that underlines decisiveness, electoral change, policy responsiveness and equality before the law may actually operate better than a political system where power is so dispersed that one cannot identify The General Will.

The attractiveness of the French *esprit des lois* derives from the ideal of a compact political system with a high capacity for decision-making and policy responsiveness to its citizens. This is unitary republicanism writ large (Suleiman and Gleize, 1997). To stay viable in the face of globalization, this kind of political system must be able to handle social heterogeneity and increased interdependencies in its relations with other countries. French politics under the Fifth Republic has shown that majoritarian democracy is just as capable as consociational democracy of being able to do so. It is a great success both domestically and externally in terms of its support for the European Union. Perhaps unitary republicanism is no more difficult to combine with intergovernmental and supranational mechanisms than consensual federalism? Indeed, the most remarkable achievement of the Union is EU law, which is after all based upon the Civil Law tradition of French politics.

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Appendix 1

Variables, indicators and sources for French data are given below.

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Vanhanen	The Vanhanen score is arrived at through multiplying participation with competition, the higher the score, the more the democracy	Vanhanen (2000)
Przeworski	The score has been multiplied by 10, ranging from 0 (no democracy) to 10 (democracy)	Przeworski <i>et al.</i> (2000)
Polity	The polity score has been arrived at by subtracting the original autocracy score from the democracy score and then normalizing the index so that it goes from 0 (no democracy) to 10 (democracy)	Gurr and Jagers (2000)
Durability	The length of the actual time in office in relation to the maximum possible time; goes from 0 to 100	Lane and Ersson (1999)
Number of months	Number of months in government	Lane and Ersson (1999)
Government crises	Number of any rapidly developing situations that threaten to bring down the present regime per year	Banks (1996)
Cabinet changes	The number of times in a year that a new premier is named	Banks (1996)
Fractionalization (a)	Party system fractionalization based on election year data	Lane and Ersson (1999)
Fractionalization (b)	Party system fractionalization based on yearly data	Banks (1996)
Volatility	Net aggregate-level change based on election year data	Lane and Ersson (1999)
Turnout	Participation rate at legislative elections based on election year data	Lane and Ersson (1999)
Current disbursements	General government expenditures as a per cent of GDP	OECD (1998)
Transfers	General government social security transfers as a per cent of GDP	OECD (1998)
Economic growth	Annual economic growth	Summers and Heston (2002)
Inflation	Annual inflation rate	Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002)
Unemployment	Annual level of unemployment	Madsen and Paldam (1978), OECD (1998)
Riots	Number of violent demonstrations with more than 1000 persons involving the use of physical force per year	Banks (1996)
Anti-government	Number of any peaceful public gatherings of at least 100 people voicing opposition to government policies per year	Banks (1996)
General strikes	Number of strike of 1000 or more workers per year	Banks (1996)
Work days lost	Number of workers involved in strikes	ILO (various years)

Appendix 2

Variables, indicators and sources for macro-data are given below.

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Affluence	Natural logarithm of GDP per capita in US dollars expressed as purchasing power parities	World Bank (2000a)
Corruption	Rescaled perceived corruption index. The high scores stand for high levels of perceived corruption and low scores for low levels of perceived corruption	Transparency International (1995)
Democracy	The democracy scores are based on the Freedom House scores where a low degree of democracy scores 1 and a high degree of democracy scores 10	Freedom House (2002)
Economic growth	Average annual real GNP/capita growth in per cent, 1990–1998	World Bank (2000b)
Electoral system	Election system as a dummy variable, where 1 = proportional systems and 0 = non-proportional systems	Reynolds and Reilly (1997), Rose (2000)
Federalism	Federalism as a dummy variable, where 1 = federalism and 0 = non-federalism	Encyclopedia Britannica
Inflation	Average inflation rate in per cent, 1990–1998	World Bank (2000b)
Misery 1	Inflation * unemployment	
Misery 2	Economic growth squared — Misery 1	
Presidentialism	Presidentialism as trichotomous variable, where 2 = presidentialism, 1 = semi-presidentialism and 0 = non-presidentialism	Derbyshire and Derbyshire (1996, 1999)
Public sector	Total government outlays as per cent of GDP for the period 1995–1999	OECD (2001)
Social spending	Public social spending in 1997 as a per cent of GDP	OECD (2001)
State age	Number of years since the introduction of modernized leadership	Based on Black (1966)
Unemployment	Average annual unemployment rate in per cent, 1990–1998	OECD (2001)