

LA COURSE AU CENTRE
Policy Convergence and Partisanship
in France, 1981-2002

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The erosion of partisan ties observed since the 1960s in many advanced industrial democracies has been attributed to a cluster of factors associated with societal modernization which accelerated in the postwar period.* Among these factors, the convergence or homogenization of social conditions and lifestyles has presented the established political parties with a number of challenges. In the first place, they can no longer rely on the solid support bases provided by socially-cohesive electorates, but instead have to broaden their appeal to attract voters from beyond the clearly-defined confines of their 'natural' class-based constituencies. Downsian theories of policy convergence and divergence in a bipolar party system predict that, in order to maximize votes, vote-seeking parties will converge on the position of the median voter who lies at the center of the voter distribution.¹ However, by gravitating toward this median ideological position, and possibly thereby renouncing a position of principle with which it has previously been strongly associated, a party exposes itself to the risk of alienating those of its voters who are furthest away from the median voter or most strongly attached to its previous ideological position. Left-wing parties in particular face an electoral trade-off between different groups of voters. With the decline of the working class, they have had to target the 'middle majority,' but by so doing they risk losing the support of their former core constituencies, who interpret the move to the center ground as a betrayal of the parties' ideological roots.² As a result of this *course au centre*, the dominant parties may end up offering very similar programs, thereby losing their previous ideological distinctiveness.

The perception among the electorate that there is little difference between the established parties, and hence a lack of choice, is likely to have an impact

on the voter-party relationship for, as Hermann Schmitt and Sören Holmberg observe, "Partisanship grows best on ground well fertilised with ideological conflict." Schmitt and Holmberg further note that "when ideological conflicts between parties diminish, people's need of parties abates and partisanship becomes less intense". Similarly, declining levels of issue conflict undercut the relevance of the parties and might also be expected to lead to a loosening of partisan ties among the electorate. In the case of France, Schmitt and Holmberg found that by the 1980s political polarization was indeed declining and issue conflicts were low.³ Between 1958 and 1983, by contrast, French political life was highly polarized. In the early years of the Fifth Republic, the growth of Gaullism led to rapid partisan alignment along a single "Gaullism/anti-Gaullism" dimension, and at the beginning of Mitterrand's first *septennat* the policies pursued by the traditional Left were radically different from those of the Right.⁴ Mitterrand's 1983 ideological about-face, the decline of the Parti communiste français [PCF], and the movement of the Parti socialiste [PS] toward the new middle class and the center ground reduced the level of polarization and ideological conflict in French politics.

When partisan dealignment began to emerge in France in the late 1980s, later than in many comparable democracies, its principal manifestation was a decline in support for the established parties as turnout fell and the vote for alternative parties increased.⁵ According to Mark Kesselman, "[l]'ère de l'exceptionnalité française a pris fin dans les années 1980."⁶ Jacques Julliard identifies the spring of 1988 as the moment when "le rapport des citoyens à la politique [s'est] trouvé soudainement changé."⁷ Analyzing the 1988 French presidential election, Florence Haegel notes a weakening of party attachment, and this continued through the next decade, culminating in the 2002 "earthquake."⁸ The first round of the 2002 presidential election provides a graphic illustration of the potential impact of partisan dealignment. Low turnout, a rise in support for the alternative party candidates, and the fragmentation and dispersal of the vote all combined to create a situation in which the far Right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, won more votes than the candidate of the moderate Left, Lionel Jospin.

Policy convergence, then, is likely to contribute to an erosion of partisan ties because it involves a lowering of the level of ideological conflict which in turn might be expected to reduce the motivation to vote consistently for a given party, or indeed to vote at all. In this article, I evaluate the impact of policy convergence on the voter-party relationship in France between the pivotal elections of 1981 and 2002. First, I analyze voters' perceptions of policy convergence drawing primarily on French national election surveys conducted by CEVIPOF⁹ and test the hypothesis that citizens who feel that there is no difference between Left and Right have weaker party attachment. This quantitative analysis is supplemented by qualitative data from semi-structured interviews carried out with French voters in Paris and Saint-Denis during the 2002 election period in order to evaluate public attitudes toward any perceived narrowing of

party differences.¹⁰ I then relate these perceptions to actual changes in the policy positions of the established parties over the period. Finally, I establish whether voters themselves have moved toward the center ground.

Voters' Perceptions of the Political Meaning of Left and Right

Left-right ideology performs a valuable function in a political system. It helps voters to orient themselves, allowing them to situate the ideological position of a party on the political spectrum, both in relation to other parties and to the voters themselves. It also acts as a kind of shorthand or 'super issue' enabling voters to interpret political life and evaluate the political parties without having to make the effort to acquire a detailed knowledge of their programs and performance. According to Oddbjørn Knutsen,¹¹ "[t]he left-right schema is thus a taxonomic system, an efficient way to understand, order and store political information." Without the cues provided by left-right ideology, voters may feel more distanced from the political process.¹²

The party spectrum appears to be well understood by French voters, most of whom, when asked in the 2002 interviews to place the major parties on a left-right continuum, had an accurate idea of their location that conformed with generally accepted judgements, such as the mean left-right party positions for France set out by Ian Budge et al.¹³ In addition, according to CEVIPOF surveys, the percentage of French voters who were able and willing to place themselves on a left-right ideological scale was consistently high over the period, with only between 2 percent and 7 percent unable to state their position. However, when it comes to attitudes toward the relevance of the left-right distinction, Sofres opinion polls provide evidence of increasing scepticism among voters. Asked in 1981 to say whether they found notions of Left and Right outdated or still valid as a way of judging what parties and politicians stand for, more voters found them valid than not (Table 1). This ratio was subsequently reversed and the percentage considering them outdated almost doubled (the 60 percent peak was first reached in 1991), while the percentage considering them still relevant decreased less dramatically, from 43 percent in 1981 to 33 percent in 2002. According to the Sofres polls, scepticism rose most sharply between 1981 and 1984, and between April and September 1991.

Table 1. The relevance of notions of Left and Right in France, 1981-2002, percentage of respondents

	1981	1984	1986	1988	1989	April 1991	Sept 1991	1992	1993	1994	2002
Outdated	33	49	45	48	56	55	60	60	56	57	60
Valid	43	37	42	44	36	33	32	31	35	34	33

Source: Sofres

Between 1981 and 1988, notions of Left and Right were seen as having greater significance during election periods, particularly presidential election periods (1981 and 1988), and during the highly confrontational legislative elections of 1986. However, for the first time in 1989, after the re-election of Mitterrand as president in 1988 and Rocard's government of "sound management," more than half of respondents considered the left-right division outdated, and this has consistently been the case since then.¹⁴

Voters were not questioned about notions of Left and Right in the 1978 CEVIPOF survey, but in 1988, 1995, and 2002 they were asked to agree or disagree with the proposition that, "Today, Left and Right don't mean much any more."¹⁵ The trends in the CEVIPOF surveys and the Sofres polls are the same, although there are quite large discrepancies in the actual percentages which probably reflect the different wording of the questions. As Table 2 shows, the percentage agreeing that the notions were no longer meaningful went up from 66.4 percent in 1988 to 74.6 percent in 2002, and the percentage who considered them to be still meaningful went down from just over a quarter of respondents (26.6 percent in 1988) to slightly under (23.4 percent in 2002). In summary, over this later period, a fairly modest 8 percent more people thought that the terms were no longer meaningful and around 3 percent fewer thought they were still meaningful. It appears, then, that the major change had taken place before 1988.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents agreeing/disagreeing with the statement "Today, Left and Right don't mean much any more"

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
Agree	66.4	72.3	74.6	+ 8.2
Disagree	26.6	25.4	23.4	- 3.2
Don't know	6.9	2.3	2.0	- 4.9

Source: CEVIPOF

In the next section, I examine the relationship between perceived left-right relevance and a set of social variables (age-group, education, and occupation) and political variables (party attachment, interest in politics, Left-Right self-placement, and support for an established or alternative party), drawing again on CEVIPOF data for 1988, 1995, and 2002, in order to identify any distinctive social or political characteristics of voters for whom notions of Left and Right lost their significance.

Table 3. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by age-group, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
18-24	68.1	72.8	73.7	+5.6
25-34	71.2	77.7	80.4	+9.2
35-44	72.8	73.0	76.5	+3.7
45-54	73.3	72.1	76.6	+3.3
55-64	75.0	75.6	74.7	-0.3
65+	68.2	72.3	73.9	+5.7

Source: CEVIPOF

Sociodemographic Variables

Between 1988 and 2002, it is only among 55-64 year-olds that there was a rise in the number finding the terms Left and Right meaningful, and this was very slight (Table 3). In all other age-groups there was a decline, and this was particularly pronounced in the case of 25-34 year-olds, but also quite marked in the 18-24 age-group. Nonetheless, it is among this youngest section of the electorate and among the two oldest age-groups that Left and Right retained the most meaning. In the case of older people, this may be due to political socialization effects; in the case of the youngest electors it is a more surprising finding but could be associated with higher education or a stronger interest in politics. The greater scepticism of 25-54 year-olds about the meaning of Left and Right suggests the possible impact of both generational change, in the case of the younger voters, and a growing disaffection with the established parties among older sections of the electorate (particularly on the Left).

Table 4. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by level of education, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
Primary or less	74.5	78.7	75.6	+1.1
Some secondary	73.7	76.4	78.6	+4.9
Baccalauréat	70.4	72.1	77.9	+7.5
Higher education	59.3	65.8	72.1	+12.8

Source: CEVIPOF

As far as level of education is concerned (Table 4), there was little change in attitudes among the least-educated and this may be related to age, since older people tend to have lower educational qualifications but are also likely to be the most partisan. In 1988, it was those with higher education who found the terms most meaningful, but by 2002 they had lost their distinctiveness and there was very little difference between the four categories. Nonetheless, those with higher education continued to find the notions most relevant,

although it was also among this group and among those with the baccalauréat that scepticism increased most.

Table 5. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by occupation, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
Employer/self-employed	74.1	78.0	75.0	+0.9
Higher salariat	60.9	57.1	68.8	+7.9
Lower salariat	68.9	70.6	73.6	+4.7
Routine non-manual	71.6	76.2	81.1	+9.5
Skilled manual	78.5	76.7	77.2	-1.3
Un-/semi-skilled manual	71.6	79.9	73.6	+2.0
Domestic/farm worker	75.2	84.4	81.9	+6.7

Source: CEVIPOF

Occupational categories are classified as follows:

Higher salariat: higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials and managers in large industrial establishments (*cadres, professions intellectuelles*)

Lower salariat: lower-grade professionals, administrators, and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small industrial establishments; supervisors of non-manual employees (*professions intermédiaires*)

Routine non-manual: higher and lower grade employees in administration and commerce (*employés*)

The only occupational category to find notions of Left and Right more meaningful in 2002 than in 1988 was skilled manual workers, although the change was slight (Table 5). Those who found them the least meaningful were routine non-manual and domestic or farm workers, and it was among these two groups that there was the biggest change, along with the higher salariat, who nonetheless remained the category attaching most relevance to Left and Right. This is consistent with the findings on education, since people classed in the higher salariat are more likely to have university qualifications.¹⁶

Political Variables

The relationship between the political variables and perceived left-right relevance is examined by carrying out a series of cross-tabulations and correlations.¹⁷ The strongest correlation is with party attachment (Table 6): those who are closer to a political party are more likely to think that Left and Right are still relevant. The correlation strengthened very slightly between 1988 and 2002 (.204*** and .227***), though remaining quite modest. There has been a slight rise in the percentage who no longer find these terms meaningful except among those who are “fairly close” to a party, where there has been a slight fall. However, in all three survey years, a majority of respondents (around 60

percent of strong and 80 percent of weak partisans) felt that Left and Right did not mean much any more.

Table 6. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right don't mean much any more by party attachment, 1988-2002

	1988	2002	1988-2002
Very close	44.4	44.7	+0.3
Fairly close	64.7	63.1	-1.6
All close	60.5	59.8	-0.7
Not very close	74.5	75.7	+1.2
Not all close	83.0	85.6	+2.6
All not close	79.3	81.9	+2.6

Source: CEVIPOF

The second strongest correlation is with interest in politics, which is also consistently significant across the period, indicating that those most interested in politics saw the greatest difference between Left and Right. This correlation declined slightly in 2002 (from $-.206^{***}$ in 1988 and $-.245^{***}$ in 1995 to $-.174^{***}$) and cross-tabulations (Table 7) show that scepticism about left-right difference has risen more sharply among those who expressed interest in politics than among those who were not interested. The greater consistency over the period among those who are not interested in politics might suggest that the link between not being interested and the sense that Left and Right are not meaningful notions may have as much to do with an inability to distinguish (because of a lack of knowledge resulting from a lack of interest) as to a considered judgment of the relevance of the notions. The sharper increase among those who express an interest in politics is therefore more worrying because it suggests that policy convergence may be reducing the political engagement of even this more politicized section of the electorate.

Table 7. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by interest in politics, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
Very interested	50.0	50.9	55.9	+ 5.9
Fairly interested	65.3	69.1	72.8	+ 7.5
Not very interested	77.5	81.6	80.7	+ 3.2
Not at all interested	81.7	88.1	84.3	+ 2.6

Source: CEVIPOF

Left-right orientation (Table 8) is more weakly correlated than the previous two political variables but is also consistently significant ($-.086^{***}$ in 1988, $-.100^{***}$ in 1995 and $-.094^{***}$ in 2002). Left-wing supporters find the notions more relevant than those on the Right. The percentage assigning least significance to the terms are those who categorize themselves as neither on the Left

or Right, and it is here also that there has been the biggest increase. Generational change may again offer one explanation for this. The progressively weaker role of political socialization in the development of partisanship means that there is a growing pool of younger, more apartisan voters who think less in terms of left-right ideology, either their own or the political parties'.

Table 8. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by Left-Right self-placement, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1998-2002
Left	63.7	65.6	68.3	+4.6
Right	72.0	74.8	76.9	+4.9
Neither	81.2	89.8	89.4	+8.2

Source: CEVIPOF

While the first three political variables—correlating by level of attachment to a political party, by interest in politics, and by Left-Right self-placement—have been highly consistent overall, the correlation with support for established or alternative parties (Table 9) has become more significant since 1988, although it is still at a fairly modest level (-.046** in 1988, -.081*** in 1995 and -.113*** in 2002). Supporters of the alternative parties see less difference between the political parties and this perception is growing fastest among these voters. Again, a generational factor may be at play here. It could also be that supporters of alternative parties are more likely to see the Left-Right distinction as outdated and that this is increasingly the case. It is also possibly a reflection of the growing disillusion with the established parties among the electorate as a whole.

Table 9. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean very much by support for established/alternative party, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1998-2002
Established party	69.0	71.1	70.2	+1.2
Alternative party	75.2	80.8	80.7	+5.5

Source: CEVIPOF

Finally, a breakdown by party affiliation (Table 10) shows that Left and Right still had most meaning for supporters of the PCF, followed by PS and then RPR supporters, and in all three cases this was very consistent over the period, although, interestingly, there was a sharper decline for the PCF than the PS. In the case of the UDF, the feeling that the terms were irrelevant peaked in 1995, possibly a reflection of the fact that in the presidential election of that year UDF supporters actually preferred Jospin to Chirac. The greatest decline is observed among supporters of the far Left and those supporting no party. A massive 91.7 percent of the latter category thought that notions of Left and

Right held little meaning in 2002, and it is among this group as well as supporters of the far Right, the UDF, and the ecologists that Left and Right had the least meaning.

Table 10. Percentage agreeing that Left and Right no longer mean much by party affiliation, 1988-2002

	1988	1995	2002	1988-2002
Far Left	61.1	77.8	72.5	+11.4
PCF	56.2	58.3	59.1	+2.9
PS	67.1	67.1	67.6	+0.5
Ecologists	77.1	77.6	80.1	+3.0
UDF	74.3	83.1	80.0	+5.7
RPR/UMP	73.3	74.8	74.0	+0.7
Far Right	75.2	82.4	80.1	+4.9
No party	81.1	85.5	91.7	+10.6

Source: CEVIPOF

In sum, the CEVIPOF findings over the period 1988-2002 suggest that political variables had a more powerful effect on perceptions of Left-Right party difference than sociodemographic variables. In particular, party attachment, Left-Right orientation, and interest in politics were consistently highly significant, while support for an established or alternative party had become more significant by 2002. The notions retained the most meaning for those who were closer to a political party—particularly in the case of the PCF, PS, and RPR—and for those supporting the Left rather than the Right (consistently by about 8 percent). They had least meaning for those categorizing themselves as neither on the Left nor the Right, and supporters of the alternative parties. In both these cases, there was a bigger rise than in the other political categories and this would suggest that the perceived loss of relevance is linked both to a declining sense of ideological orientation and declining support for the established parties.

Sociodemographic factors carried less weight than political factors but some trends are discernible. In terms of age, it was for the youngest and oldest age-groups that Left and Right had most meaning. Level of education appears to have had a declining impact but it was still those with higher education who found the notions most relevant. In terms of socioeconomic status, the notions of Left and Right had least significance for routine non-manual and domestic or farm workers and most for the higher salariat.

Thus, according to the CEVIPOF data, by 2002, fully three-quarters of French voters perceived little difference between Left and Right. It was those who were most interested in politics and those who had higher education that continued to see a difference, although the direction of causation is unclear. It may be that greater interest in or understanding of politics enables voters to detect more easily what are now often quite subtle differences between political parties.

Voters' Attitudes toward Policy Convergence

The quantitative data provide strong evidence that French voters see increasingly little difference between Left and Right. This does not necessarily mean that voters view this development negatively. They may regard policy convergence between the established parties in a neutral or even positive light. In order to qualify voters' perceptions and to draw out some of the factors underlying them, two questions were put to voters in the 2002 interviews. First, they were asked how much difference they thought there was between the political parties. A follow-up question asked them to elaborate on what they considered to be the most important differences between the moderate Left and the moderate Right.

Their responses suggest that many voters do in fact still see a fundamental ideological distinction between Left and Right, but one which is more theoretical than actual. Supporters of both established and alternative parties of the Left and Right described these differences in terms of traditional social cleavages and the conflict of class interests. Broadly speaking, the Left was seen as defending the working class, disadvantaged, and poor, and the Right as representing the middle and upper classes, the privileged, and the rich. This opposition was expressed primarily in terms of the relationships between the individual and society and between the state and the market. Left-wing parties were associated with greater state intervention and nationalization, with higher levels of bureaucracy, and a greater presence of technocrats in parliament. The Right was seen as giving priority to economic liberalism and the market. It was perceived by its own supporters, and by some on the Left too, as being stronger, more dynamic, and more prepared to modernize the French state and introduce unpopular but necessary reforms. The two camps were seen as employing different economic mechanisms: wealth redistribution, defense of public services, and higher levels of employment, on the Left; lower taxation, further privatization, and less state intervention on the Right.

Overall, Left-Right divergence was seen more as a feature of social than economic policy. The Left was still strongly identified with social justice and social progress and a more humanitarian approach concerned with social inequalities and support for ethnic and other minorities. In the non-economic domain, the Right was associated with law and order, immigration control, and the defense of national sovereignty. In more simplistic terms, as one voter put it, the Left represents the "heart" and the Right the "head."

Even though voters could delineate ideological differences, there was also a perception that neither the Left nor the Right was respecting the traditions which they draw on or implementing measures consistent with their stated ideological position. Voters, especially on the alternative Left and Right, accused the moderate parties of political "cross-dressing" and of having betrayed and moved away from their traditional support base. In the case of the Left, this betrayal manifested itself in the Socialists' espousing a neo-liberal

economic position and even encroaching on the right-wing preserve of law and order.

My impression is that the Left are moving closer to the Center and the Right have introduced some social measures. The two sides are more convergent than they were in the 1980s. *(26-year-old supporter of the PS and the Greens)*

In the 2002 presidential elections you saw how, up until the first round, Jospin tried to campaign on law and order, which is traditionally the preserve of the Right. *(27-year-old RPR supporter)*

Although a few voters (on both the moderate Left and Right) perceived a clear distinction between Right and Left, the majority could see more difference in the way they presented their policies and in the way they approached issues than in their substantive positions on them, a divergence more in terms of how to do things than what to do.

I don't see much difference in terms of the measures they take. As far as their ideas are concerned, there's not an enormous amount of difference either, but there's still some. *(34-year-old supporter of the Greens and the PS)*

The differences today are less ideological; it's more a question of how we're going to deal with unemployment or how we're going to relaunch the economy. *(27-year-old RPR supporter)*

There are differences but they're not all that fundamental. In fact I'd say they're defending policies which are relatively similar, it's just the approach that's different. They represent two versions of the same politics with two different approaches. But in the end the policies are relatively convergent, it's more a question of method. *(50-year-old PS supporter)*

What differentiates them is the way they package things. *(41-year-old partisan voter)*

There's still a difference of discourse ... but as far as actually implementing policy is concerned, there's no difference any more. *(47-year-old PCF supporter)*

This perceived depolarization evoked a degree of nostalgia, particularly among left-wing voters, for a time when the ideological lines were more clearly drawn.

I think that in the past when there was still a genuine Left-Right debate ... people really felt that there was something at stake, they thought that if they voted for the Left that would really change things fundamentally, so they were prepared to make an effort and vote. *(50-year-old supporter of LCR)*

Perhaps what's missing is any clear sense of direction. It's obviously very different from May 1968 when there was so much enthusiasm. *(50-year-old PS supporter)*

Some years ago, elections were still important. People felt involved. That's less and less the case now. There used to be major conflicts between the Left and Right, the parties stood for something, the Communist Party, the Right, everything was well defined. Now you get the impression that there's no difference between the Socialists and the RPR. (47-year-old PCF supporter)

The desire for greater clarity and distinctiveness was not confined to older voters mourning the passing of a bygone golden age. Younger voters voiced similar attitudes:

The parties are very similar. I don't think the PS is proposing an alternative program of any consequence. I'd like to see more variety, with parties taking quite distinct positions. (19-year-old RPR supporter)

There's no clear and distinct choice of society. There isn't any clarity about the major parties. Left and Right don't really exist any more. I don't see a difference, I see a similarity. (31-year-old *apartisan* voter, formerly PS supporter)

Overall, then, on the basis of the 2002 interviews, the public perception which emerged was of the established parties becoming progressively more convergent since 1981, to a point where, at best, they were proposing different means to achieve the same ends. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that scepticism about differences between Left and Right rose most sharply between 1981 and 1984, with a second surge after 1988. This points to two critical periods of heightened public perception of convergence: the first coinciding with the U-turn of the Socialists in 1983, and the second with the period after Mitterrand won his second *septennat* in 1988. In the next section, I establish the extent to which voters' perceptions of policy convergence can be seen as an accurate reflection of the actual policy positions of the established parties over the period.

Changes in the Policy Positions of the Established Parties

In order to evaluate changes in the policy stances of the established parties, I draw first on data provided by the Manifesto Research Group (MRG),¹⁸ which measure changes in parties' placements along the Left-Right continuum, presenting a summary of their preferred policy positions and tracing their ideological convergence or divergence over time. The MRG uses an index to capture the Left-Right dimension based on a set of categories that encompasses the main policy differences that would be expected to exist between the Left and Right. The scale is created by adding up the percentage of references to the Left and Right categories and subtracting the sum of the Left percentages from the sum of the Right percentages. Negative scores therefore represent leftist positions and positive scores rightist positions.

Table 11. Position of French parties on the left-right continuum, 1978-2002

	1978	1981	1986	1988	1993	1997	2002	1978-2002
RPR/UMP	19.1	15.4	40.5	23.5	10.9	3.3	-8.9	-28.0
UDF	10.9	10.9	10.9	10.9	-4.7	3.3	7.2	-3.7
PS	-39.2	-27.8	-8.6	-13.6	-23.2	-13.3	-16.1	+23.1
PCF	-39.9	-32.3	-26.1	-19.8	-38.1	-32.9	-17.5	+22.4
L-R distance	59	47.7	66.6	43.3	49	36.2	24.7	-34.3

Sources: Budge et al. (2001); Klingemann et al. (2006)

According to the MRG data, the Left-Right ideological distance between the four established parties in France narrowed considerably between 1978 and 2002 (Table 11). Of the four established parties, it was the UDF which most consistently maintained its position, while the PS, PCF, and RPR/UMP all gravitated toward the center ground. In fact, the distance between the two dominant parties of Left and Right narrowed by a total of 51 points, the PS moving 23.1 to the Right between 1978 and 2002 and the RPR/UMP moving 28.0 points to the Left. What is most striking, however, is the narrowing of the overall Left-Right distance from 59 points in 1978 to 24.7 points in 2002 as a result of quite dramatic shifts in the policy positions of the PCF and UMP in that year. These trends are illustrated graphically in Figure 1.

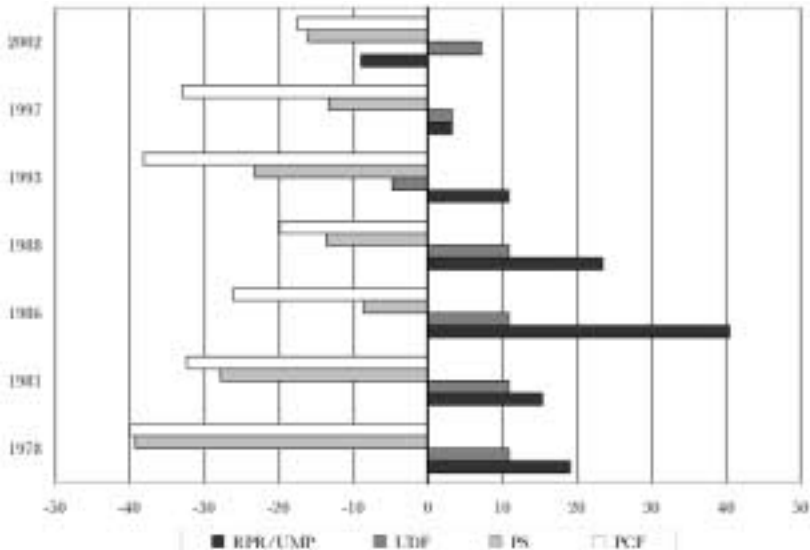


Figure 1. Position of French parties on the Left-Right continuum, 1978-2002

Source: Budge et al. (2001); Klingemann et al. (2006)

These findings are supported by expert judgments on the changing left-right locations of parties which conclude that, between the early 1980s and

early 1990s, in France as in western Europe more broadly, the parties of the Left moved to the right and a significant number of parties of the Right moved to the left, implying a strong centrist tendency.¹⁹ Manifesto analysis thus provides evidence of a narrowing of the ideological space in the French party system between 1978 and 2002. This Left-Right depolarization was most notable in the case of the two dominant parties in the French party system, the PS and the RPR/UMP. However, until 2002, when even the increasingly weakened PCF began to gravitate closer to the center ground, Left-Right convergence resulted more from the rightward move of the PS than the leftward move of the RPR. This occurred despite the fact that, as Markus Wagner notes, “analyses of the political discourse of the PS consistently point out the clear gap between what the party says and what it does. Although the party may implement quite pragmatic policies while in government, party discourse remains undeniably radical.”²⁰

It is the loss of ideological distinctiveness of the parties of the Left, and particularly the PS, which is most commented on by the voters interviewed in Paris in 2002:

My impression is that everything's veered to the Right. And that's why the Socialists have ended up somewhere near the Center. (*47-year-old PCF supporter*)

There is a difference between Left and Right. But there isn't necessarily much difference between what the Socialists and the moderate Right actually do. That doesn't mean that Left doesn't mean anything any more. It just means that the PS policies are no longer left-wing. (*50-year-old supporter of LCR*)

Today the PS doesn't have very strong socialist leanings and economically it's very liberal. (*30-year-old RPR supporter*)

There's a whole section of the Left in the PS or in other movements which to my mind is moving away from the basic philosophy. And then there's a section of their electorate which still holds to that original philosophy. My impression is that they're finding it much harder now to define the margins of the [Socialist] party. (*45-year-old member of the Greens*)

To what extent, then, are the findings from manifesto analysis corroborated by actual changes in the policy stances of the established parties in France? In the next section, I identify key factors in the convergence of the established parties' positions and draw again on the 2002 interviews to illustrate voters' responses to developments. In particular, I explore changes in the years between 1981 and 1988 identified earlier as the period when public perceptions of a convergence between Left and Right increased most sharply and when partisan dealignment first emerged in France.

The Left in Power: from 1981 (Rupture) to 1983 (U-turn)

Bipolarization, encouraged by the presidentialization of politics under the Fifth Republic, had achieved its perfect form in France in what has been

described as a *quadrille bipolaire* at the time of the 1978 legislative elections, which were contested by two opposing forces of roughly equal size, the PS and PCF on the Left, and the RPR and UDF on the Right. The level of ideological conflict was heightened because there was competition not only between these two blocs, but also within them. On the Left, this rivalry had existed since the 1971 Epinay Congress and meant that, in order to compete with the PCF for votes and to counter communist charges that it was now a social democratic party, the PS had moved to the Left. The program on which the Socialists contested (and won) the 1981 presidential and legislative elections, *Les 110 propositions*, like the party's 1980 *Projet socialiste pour la France des années 80* and the 1978 *Programme commun de gouvernement de la Gauche*, drew heavily on the 1972 Common Program. The text was imbued with Marxist rhetoric and contained a number of references to class conflict. In the 1977 revision of the Common Program, the party's aims were set out as follows:

To break the domination of big capital and set in motion a new economic and social policy, rejecting the policy of the present government, the government will progressively carry out the transfer to the collectivity of the most important means of production and financial instruments now in the hands of dominant capitalist groups.

Yet less than two years after coming to power, confronted with rising unemployment and inflation, the PS was forced to abandon the 'socialist experiment' and execute a U-turn on its economic policy. The realization that the economic action required was incompatible with socialist ideology, and the concomitant introduction of an austerity plan in March 1983, marked a turning point in public attitudes to the Left. With little choice but to take pragmatic measures in order to salvage the situation, the Socialists appeared ideologically bereft. The continuing decline of the PCF and its withdrawal from the Mauroy government meant that an alliance on the Left was no longer a profitable venture for the PS, but also freed it from the need to compete with the Communists for the left-wing vote. The economic measures implemented by the 1984-86 Fabius government were more right-wing than those of any previous conservative government. As well as leading to severe job cuts, a wage and salary freeze was introduced and fiscal measures were taken to encourage investment and attract the right-wing electorate. The deteriorating economic situation meant that even hard-liners were forced to accept the need for a reconciliation between the Left and the business world and subscription to the *pensée unique* (dominant thinking) that gave primacy to a liberal, free-market economy. The failure of the socialist experiment led to an overall loss of political bearings for the so-called *décus du socialisme*, who had difficulty coming to terms with their party's embrace of economic liberalism.²¹

1986-88: Cohabitation and Ouverture

During Mitterrand's first *septennat* (1981-88), the Fifth Republic experienced a novel phenomenon, *cohabitation*. The first cohabitation (1986-88) was a

conflictual period during which Left and Right sought to re-assert their political differences on issues such as privatization, immigration (which had become a more salient issue with the breakthrough of the FN in the 1986 legislative elections), and law and order. Nonetheless, the traditional economic reference points were becoming increasingly blurred. The center-right government had no more success than its predecessor in bringing down unemployment, and given the intractability of this problem both Left and Right were in tacit agreement to avoid debate on the subject.

Initially, cohabitation was popular with the French electorate, who felt that in some respects it gave them the best of both worlds. However, it also created a situation in which the line between government and opposition was blurred and where there was less transparency about who was accountable for what. Voters interviewed in Paris in 2002 commented on the lack of coherence or co-ordination between prime minister and president and the confusion about areas of responsibility.

I realize now that cohabitation must have contributed to a sense of confusion and the impression that Left and Right are the same. (31-year-old supporter of the Greens)

Once the political set-up in France had become blurred, and the Socialists were pursuing liberal rather than social policies, people were disappointed. They stopped believing their promises. And then when the Right got back in, everything got mixed up and people lost interest in politics, politics lost credibility. It was when there was the first cohabitation, after the first defeat of the Left in the legislative elections, in 1986. That's when things really started to go downhill. (50-year-old supporter of LCR)

With cohabitation, you finally realized that the Socialists were carrying out some quite right-wing, liberal policies, and then conversely when the Right were in power in the late eighties they introduced some more social policies. There's really no difference any more. Politics is dictated by economic criteria. (47-year-old PCF supporter)

It's true that ideological differences in the economic sphere have become terribly blurred. And that's why a lot of people find it difficult to see a real difference between Right and Left. In my view, this is a consequence of cohabitation. (27-year-old RPR supporter)

In addition to cohabitation, this period saw a second institutional innovation when in 1988 the Rocard government initiated a policy of *ouverture* (opening up) to non-leftist politicians and to civil society. This led to ministerial positions for Brice Lalonde of Génération écologie and Bernard Kouchner of Médecins sans frontières and formed an element of Rocard's "political big bang" project to turn the PS into a modern movement but was also designed to appeal to the center ground by breaking down the division between Left and Right.

European Integration and Globalization

If the strategy of *ouverture* contributed to a climate of more consensual politics, the mainstream parties' positions on European integration also blurred party

lines. This issue came onto the domestic political agenda in 1986 with the signing of the Single European Act which would lead to the Single Market, of which both the moderate Left and Right approved. The growing consensus between the parties of the Center was underlined in 1992 in the run-up to the referendum on Maastricht when the issue of Europe came to the forefront of political debate. Yet this debate was not between the political camps of Left and Right, each of whom was internally divided, but between Europhiles and Eurosceptics at the political center and periphery respectively. European integration thus became an issue which cut across and displaced notions of Left and Right. As such, voters viewed it as contributing to the ‘centering’ of French political life.

From an economic point of view, I don’t see much difference. They’re all moving toward the Center, in terms of liberalization, and it’s the same with this liberal, free market Europe. *(22-year-old partisan voter)*

European integration means that Left and Right have to pursue economic programs which are almost identical. *(31-year-old supporter of the Greens)*

I think that Europe is a constraining factor. There’s an economically liberal policy in Europe which means that social policy is totally ignored. *(50-year-old supporter of LCR)*

Two other international developments contributed to a depolarization of French domestic politics. The growing dominance of the capitalist economic model embodied in the spread of globalization in the 1980s and the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War in 1989 created a new global economic and political environment in which political parties and governments had to operate.

The 1980s and early 1990s can, thus, be seen as a time of fundamental change in French politics in which a number of factors contributed to a convergence of the mainstream parties’ policy agendas and political behavior. To what extent, then, is this centering of the mainstream parties matched by a similar pattern in the electorate?

Voter-Party Congruence and the Median Voter

Analysis of voters’ Left-Right self-placement in CEVIPOF surveys between 1978 and 2002 shows that the location of the median voter also shifted (see Table 12). On the 7-point scale used, the median position is 4. Taking the mean of the positions of all respondents, the average French voter was located to the Left of this median point over the entire period with an average mean of 3.83 (3.71 in 1978, 3.81 in 1988, 3.99 in 1995, 3.79 in 2002). However, between 1978 and 1995 voters moved progressively to the Right before swinging back

in 2002 to a position slightly to the left of the 1988 position. In statistical terms, the median position has been consistently skewed to the Right (positive values), indicating greater support for left-wing parties. This finding is supported by Hans-Dieter Klingemann who, drawing on Eurobarometer data (1973-1991), found a center-left orientation to be characteristic of France.²²

Table 12. Voters' Left-Right self-placement, 7-point scale, 1978-2002

	1978	1988	1995	2002	Average
Far Left	2.3%	2.6%	5.6%	5.8%	4.1%
Left	15.8%	11.3%	11.6%	13.8%	13.1%
Center Left	26.4%	29.1%	20.3%	23.6%	24.9%
Center	27.1%	29.1%	25.4%	25.8%	26.9%
Center Right	21.6%	17.2%	19.2%	18.6%	19.2%
Right	6.3%	8.2%	12.9%	8.4%	9.0%
Far Right	0.6%	2.5%	4.9%	4.1%	3.0%

Source: CEVIPOF

Overall, there was very little change in the position of the median voter according to these figures. However, this is only half of the story. Closer examination reveals that while the percentage of voters locating themselves at the Left, center Left, Center and center Right was down, self-placement on the far Left, Right and far Right was up. In other words, across the whole left-right spectrum, there was divergence at the extremes. Self-placement at the far Left and far Right was 2.9% in 1978 and 9.9% in 2002, a slight drop from the 1995 peak of 10.5% (Table 13).

Table 13. Divergence to the far Left and far Right of the French political spectrum, 1978-2002

	1978	1988	1995	2002
Far Left	2.3%	2.6%	5.6%	5.8%
Far Right	0.6%	2.5%	4.9%	4.1%
Total	2.9%	5.1%	10.5%	9.9%

Source: CEVIPOF

There is evidence that voters increasingly turned to alternative parties and to the extremes as a reaction against the convergence of the established parties and to their shared failure to resolve long-term problems such as unemployment. In other cases, a vote for the alternative parties represented a protest vote, in response, for example, to the Socialists' perceived betrayal of their ideological principles:

People vote for the far Left to say to the mainstream parties of the Left, 'You've got to pay more attention to social issues.' They don't do enough for the least well-off in France. It took them a long time to get round to introducing welfare reforms like universal health cover. (*26-year-old partisan voter*)

A number of interviewees identified the confusion between the established Left and Right during cohabitation as having bolstered support for the FN. At the same time, it has encouraged support for alternative parties of the far Left and respect for the more unequivocal and forthright agendas of extremist parties in general.

Conclusion

Policy convergence between the mainstream parties of the Left and Right in France between 1981 and 2002 was the result of a combination of endogenous and exogenous social, political, and economic factors. Social convergence has resulted from the processes of post-industrialization associated with the decline of the working class and the expansion of the new middle class. The 1980s were marked by significant changes in the French party system, with the progressive electoral decline of the PCF leading to a socialist hegemony on the Left. This situation was mirrored on the Right, where the RPR became the dominant party while the UDF declined electorally. As the PS and the RPR/UMP have progressively dominated their respective ideological camps, they have also encroached on each other's political preserves. The electorate's confusion about what exactly the parties stand for now that neither Left nor Right can offer a clearly-differentiated political vision has been intensified by the experience of cohabitation and the growing salience of the cross-cutting issue of Europe. These developments have all contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between Left and Right. The 'reversibility' of the mainstream parties has also enhanced the appeal of alternative and extremist parties.

In party political terms, this convergence was driven more from the Left than from the Right, primarily as a result of the 'embourgeoisement' of the PS and the decline of the PCF. The collapse of Communism in 1989 was obviously bound to have a greater impact on the French Left than on the Right. Since the Socialists were increasingly directing their programs at the growing new middle class in order to avoid electoral defeat, this meant that neither of the parties of the moderate Left was seen as being in a position to defend the interests of the working class or the least secure stratum of society. Partisan dealignment emerged in France during Socialist presidencies and there is evidence that it is the moderate Left which has been more damaged by the erosion of partisan ties. It appears to be left-wing voters, who were typically more attached to their political parties than voters on the Right, that have felt most let down by the established parties which traditionally represented them (the PS and the PCF).

Left-Right ideological labels still matter to voters, even though they too have moved to the Center. Moreover, there is a strong connection between patterns of partisanship and the perception that Left and Right are still relevant notions in French political life which indicates that policy convergence

is indeed a significant factor in the erosion of partisan ties. Parties are still expected to represent clear alternatives and their loss of distinctiveness is regretted. In part, this is because Left-Right ideology serves as a practical device for helping voters to simplify the complexities of political life. Yet partisanship has an affective as well as a cognitive dimension, and it appears that many voters continue to value the symbolic role played by parties as an outlet for the expression of a sense of political identity.

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Notes

* I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their valuable comments.

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2. Ronald Inglehart and Jacques-René Rabier, "Political Realignment in Advanced Industrial Society: From Class-Based Politics to Quality-of-Life Politics," *Government and Opposition* 21 (1986); Geoffrey Evans, *The End of Class Politics? Class Voting in Comparative Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6-7.
3. Hermann Schmitt and Sören Holmberg, "Political Parties in Decline?" in *Citizens and the State*, ed. Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119-21, 122-23, 111.
4. Ronald Inglehart and Avram Hochstein, "Alignment and Dealignment of the Electorate in France and the United States," *Comparative Political Studies* 5 (1972), 361.
5. "Established parties" refers to the Parti socialiste, Parti communiste, Union pour la démocratie française (UDF) and Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), which in 2002 became the Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP). "Alternative parties" refers to the ecologists, the far-left Lutte ouvrière (LO) and Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), and the far-right Front national (FN) and Mouvement national républicain (MNR).
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9. I am very grateful to the Banque de Données Socio-Politiques (BDSP) at IEP Grenoble for providing access to the CEVIPOF (Centre d'Étude de la Vie Politique Française Contemporaine) data-sets. The 1978 and 1997 surveys relate to parliamentary elections, the 1988 survey to the presidential election, and all three are post-election surveys. The 2002 data are drawn from the first wave of the panel study conducted before the elections, since the post-election data are likely to have been contaminated by the exceptional circumstances of 2002, in which Jacques Chirac faced Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election.
10. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were carried out between April and July 2002 with thirty-three voters in Paris from a sample drawn from the electoral register of the fourteenth arrondissement. A further ten interviews were conducted in July 2002 with a random sample of voters in Saint-Denis in the *banlieues* north of Paris. The interviewees, while not representative of the French electorate as a whole, included a cross-section of the population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, political affiliation, education, and occupation.
11. Oddbjørn Knutsen, "Expert Judgements of the Left-Right Location of Political Parties: A Comparative Longitudinal Study," *West European Politics* 21, 2 (1998), 63.
12. Arthur Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government, 1964-70," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974), 963.
13. Ian Budge, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Andrea Volkens, Judith Bara, and Eric Tanenbaum, *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors and Governments 1945-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54.
14. In March 2007, responses to the Sofres poll showed 53 percent considering notions of Left and Right to be outdated and 41 percent considering them to be still valid.
15. "Aujourd'hui, les notions de gauche et de droite ne veulent plus dire grand chose."
16. On political sophistication and partisanship, see Sally Marthaler, "The Paradox of the Politically-Sophisticated Partisan: The French Case," *West European Politics* 31, 5 (2008), 937-59.
17. All correlations are Spearman's rho. Significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = significant at the .01 level; ** = significant at the .05 level; * = significant at the .10 level.
The data were coded as follows:
Strength of party attachment: 1= Very close; 2= Fairly close; 3= Not very close; 4= Not at all close
Left-Right self-placement: 1= Left; 2= Right
Interest in politics: 1= Very interested; 2= Fairly interested; 3= Not very interested; 4= Not at all interested
Left and Right don't mean much any more: 1 = Totally agree; 2 = Agree somewhat; 3 = Disagree somewhat; 4 = Totally disagree
Support established/alternative party: 1 = Established; 2 = Alternative.
18. Budge et al., *Mapping Policy Preferences*; Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Andrea Volkens, Judith Bara, Ian Budge, and Michael McDonald, *Mapping Policy Preferences II: Estimates for Parties, Electors and Governments in Eastern Europe, European Union and OECD 1990-2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
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21. Sue Collard, "The Elusive French Exception," in *The French Exception*, ed. Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 34.
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