

France

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Introduction

The creation of France as a nation state can be traced back to the Treaty of Verdun in 843. The treaty divided the Carolingian Empire into three parts, one becoming France (Bainville, 1926: 26). The transition to democracy began with the First Republic, proclaimed in 1892 after the French Revolution, and decisively progressed in the Third Republic (1875-1940), where the principle of universal suffrage became the first time an “authenticated source of political power” (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 642).

The Third Republic adopted its constitution in 1875, which remained in force until the establishment of the Vichy regime, the Fourth Republic, in 1940 (Sternberger et al., 1969: 29). France enters the ABEL dataset in 1919. It has a bicameral system, where the Chamber of Deputies was elected once in four years and composed of 574 to 616 seats (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 704).

Electoral results in France during the Third Republic suffer from a number of complexities, such as varying party labels, party proliferation on the left and right, and variable membership of individual politicians in different party organizations. Most importantly, French politics featured separate electoral and parliamentary group membership. Individual candidates would run in broad-based electoral alliances. For example, during the 1919 parliamentary election, former ideological opponents from the political center and conservative forces formed the *Bloc National Républicain* (National Bloc) and ran united lists in about half of the constituencies (Sternberger et al., 1969: 475).¹ Once candidates entered parliament they sorted into ideologically more coherent groups. The electoral results reported in the ABEL data are based on parliamentary groups, not on electoral alliances.

Elections

Between 1919 and 1939, five elections for the Chamber of Deputies (*Chambre des députés*) took place. In June 1919, France adopted a mixed electoral system in multi-member

¹The bloc united erstwhile supporters of the monarchy with stalwart republicans.

constituencies. Voters had as many votes as the districts had seats. The electoral system featured a strongly majoritarian element that led to highly skewed translations of votes into seats: candidates who secured votes that exceeded the number of registered voters in a district would automatically win a seat. The remaining seats were distributed through open list proportional representation via the Hare quota (Mackie and Rose, 1991: 132). In June 1927, the electoral system was changed back to an absolute majority system in single-member constituencies. This system remained in place up to the end of the Third Republic. France had 89 constituencies in the elections of 1919 and 1924, and 90 constituencies afterwards (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010).

France experienced considerable political instability during the interwar years with 19 different prime ministers and 39 cabinets. Governments composed of parties from the ideological right managed to govern throughout the legislative periods following their victories in the 1919 and 1928 elections. Left-wing governments in 1924, 1932, and 1936, however, failed before their terms ended due to partisan in-fighting.

16 October 1919

The first election under the new electoral system pitted a fragmented left against a more homogeneous. Particularly, the position of the *Socialist Party* (Parti socialiste), at the time French Section of the Worker's International, towards the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism divided the left and mobilized the right. Although the *Socialist Party* gained most votes (23.36%) it obtained just 67 of 616 parliamentary seats. In contrast, the center-right *Republican Union* (Union républicaine), achieved a vote share of 22.66% but gained almost one third of all seats. The discrepancy between vote and seat shares resulted from the highly disproportionate majoritarian element of the mixed system and the strategic decision by the *Republican Union* to contest election as part of the broader *Bloc National Républicain* alliance. Overall, the *National bloc* gained one third of all votes, and 44.8 percent of the seats, while the Socialists lost half their mandates. Georges Clemenceau continued to lead the government as prime minister but resigned a few months later because he was not nominated as a presidential candidate by his party.

25 May 1924

The 1924 election saw the political fortunes of the left and right turned upside down compared to the previous elections. Burdened with the economic consequences of World War 1, the right-wing government led by Poincaré had to implement tax increases and reduce state salaries (Sharp, 1924: 538). Moreover, parties of the right ran individual platforms, while the left united under the banner of the *Cartel des Gauches* (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 649). The *Republican Union* (Union républicaine) once again managed to win a plurality of votes with 35.35% and increased its lead over the *Socialist Party* (Parti socialiste) which obtained 20.1%. Yet due to the strategic decision to unite under one electoral banner, the left translated its votes into 46.8% of seats and formed the next government. A coalition government between the *Radical Socialist Party* and the *Left Republicans* formed under Édouard Herriot and was supported by other left-wing parties including the *Socialist Party* and its splinter, the *French Communist Party*. When the latter stopped supporting the government in 1926, the left lost power, and Poincaré returned to power to lead a coalition of centrist and conservative parties.

29 April 1928

After the center-right Poincaré government returned to power in 1926, it reintroduced the two-round absolute majority system in single-member constituencies for the 1928 elections (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 649). The electoral campaign was not as divisive as the previous elections and did not feature any central issue. Rather the Poincaré government campaigned for the continuation of the status quo (Sharp, 1928). While the left parties again formed an electoral coalition, the communists refused to join and thereby reduced the changes of the other left parties in the second round of the election. The *Left Republicans* (Républicaine gauche) won most votes with 23.19%, followed by the *Republican Union* (Union républicaine) with 21.99%. Yet overall, the political right claimed more seats than votes, and a majority in the parliamentary chamber. Poincaré (Left Republican) formed another centrist cabinet with the Left Republican Party, the Radical Socialists, the Republican Union, the Independent Radicals and the Republican

Socialist Party. Up to the 1932 elections, ten new governments were formed in total

8 May 1932

The 1932 elections were held in the shadow of the Great Depression. It brought large losses to the incumbent centre-right government and substantial gains to the parties on the left. The *Left Republicans* (Républicaine gauche) came ahead with 23.19%, followed by the *Republican Union* (Union républicaine) with 21.99%. The reconstituted left-wing alliance, Cartel de Gauches, won a majority of seats but could not agree on a unified government program. Thus, Herriot from the *Radical Socialist Party* formed a coalition with the right-of-center *Republican Union* and the *Independent Radicals*. Fighting the consequences of the Great Depression as well as multiple scandals, French politics became more unstable with eleven cabinets forming between 1932 and 1936.

On the right, extra-parliamentary opposition to democratic rule, the so-called “leagues”, marched on the French parliament building on February 6th, 1934. Police forces used machine guns against the protesters who were equivocating between storming parliament and protesting outside the building. At the end of the day, the attack on parliament left 17 dead and more than 600 injured (Sharp, 1934: 458). In response to the violent protest, a national unity government formed under the leadership of Doumergue. It included all parties except the Socialist and Communist parties and implemented substantial economic reforms (ibid., 458-9).

3 May 1936

The 1936 elections were held against the backdrop of the attack on parliament in February 1936. Parts of the political right came under the influence of the fascist leagues while the left joined by the *Communist Party* and some centrists united in the *Popular Front* (front populaire) (Sharp, 1936: 859-60). A contemporary observer described the developments as a “far-reaching realignment of political forces” (ibid., 860). Overcoming the doctrinal differences to defend democracy against Fascism (see Jackson, 1990), the left-wing alliance won the 1936 election with a program that called for “Liberty, Bread & Peace.”

The united right-wing national bloc, composed of the *Left Republicans* (Républicaine gauche) and *Republican Union* (Union républicaine), gained over 40% of the votes but just over 36% of all seats. In contrast, the united left gained almost 60% of votes and 64% of seats. The *Socialist Party* (Parti socialiste) led the polls with 25.76% while the *French Communist Party* (Parti communiste française), which had moderated its position of non-cooperation with other left-wing parties, received its strongest result of the interwar years with 15.26% of the vote.

Confronted by labor strikes and a dismal economic situation, the Popular Front government passed a flurry of laws that addressed long-standing labor demands by introducing a forty-hour week and legalizing collective wage contracts (Sharp, 1936: 876-7). High inflation counteracted several of the social reforms and wage increases for workers. Deep disagreement over supporting the Spanish republican government in the civil war against the nationalist rebels further divided the coalition, which eventually broke apart in 1938. The centrist *Radical Socialists* took over the government and banned the *Communist Party*.

Parties

The party system in France in the interwar period was characterized by multiple reinforcing cleavages. Next to the classic division between capital (right) and labor (left), older cleavages between church and state as well as monarchists and republicans superimposed themselves on the master cleavage. Several liberal, republican parties moved to the ideological right, which led to sometimes confusing party labels, for example, the *Left Republicans* being one of the main center-right parties. Some actors aimed at overcoming this cleavage after World War I, but only with moderate success: the catholic groups stayed together with the political right, merging into anti-parliamentary and fascist-authoritarian groups in the interwar period (Sternberger et al., 1969: 479). Other divisions such as different interpretations of Socialism divided the left and the right from within and made stable government coalitions difficult.

Geographically, the Republicans and Radicals had support in the rural south, while the Right established itself in the northeastern part of the country. After World War I, the Socialists made advances in the south (Midi), where the Radicals had held strongholds between 1900 and 1914. In 1936, the Socialists gained support in the west and southwest, occupying positions formerly held by the Radicals in 1920. Around the same time, the Communists succeeded the Socialists in the suburbs of Paris, the north, the industrial areas of Alsace, central France, and the Mediterranean coast. The right remained strong in the north west and north east, and some distant areas in the south west and south east. Overall, France exhibited a fairly strong correlation between the rural, catholic areas of France and support for the right. (Sternberger et al., 1969: 479).

Parti républicain socialiste

Original Name	Parti républicain socialiste
Other Names	Republican Socialist Party
Abbreviation	PRS
Factions	

The *Republican Socialist Party* (PRS) was founded in 1911 by socialists who refused to join the French Section of the Workers' International (here: *Socialist Party*) and existed up to 1934. Aristide Briand and René Viviani were leading the PRS. Pursuing an opportunistic course, the party understood itself as a bridge between the left-wing Socialists and the centre-left Radicals. The PRS held a moderate stance against the influence of the clergy, adhered to the principles of evolutionary socialism, and acknowledged the idea of the state owning economic businesses. In 1919, Briand left the PRS to found together with his followers the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste Français), which less adhered to the doctrine of class struggle. The two parties merged again in May 1926 into the Republican Socialist and French Socialist Party (Parti Républicain Socialiste et Socialiste Français) and became part of the Popular Front (Front populaire) in 1936 (McHale 1983: 297; Wende 1981: 189).

Radicaux indépendants

Original Name	Radicaux indépendant
Other Names	Independent Radicals
Abbreviation	RI
Factions	

The *Independent Radicals* were a centrist political party located at the right of the the Radical Socialist Party, sharing many of its positions. They were known as “economic conservatives who did not want to break with the left, voting with the right on economic issues and with the left on political issues” (Siegfried, 1930: 174). As moderate republicans, the party emphasized the defense of bourgeois interests and advocated for prudent financial policies. Two factions existed in the party: one that built an alliance with the *Left Republicans* (ARGRI), and another that rejected this alliance and later formed the *Independent Radical and Democratic Left*. Due to its centrist position, the party participated in numerous government cabinets of the left and right.

Parti socialiste

Original Name	Parti socialiste, Section française de l’Internationale Ouvrière
Other Names	Socialist Party, French Section of the Workers’ International
Abbreviation	PS, SFIO
Factions	Parti Socialiste Français

The *Socialist Party*, then called the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO), was founded in 1905 through the merger of several smaller socialist groups. Its primary goal was the transformation of the capitalist society into a collectivist or communist one. It managed to establish not only a strong party organization but also subjected its members of parliament to strict party discipline, unlike any other political group. While the Communists were the only other party to achieve this, the Socialists’ success in maintaining party unity was notable. Prior to World War I, the Socialists held a social revolutionary stance, but between 1919 and 1939, the party gradually transformed into a “radical” party, as per French terminology, abandoning revolutionary measures in their political activities to align with the preferences of their voters. However, even

after the Communists split from the Socialist Party in 1920, the Socialists remained loyal to their revolutionary and Marxist rhetoric. This created a situation where, like the *Radicals*, there was an increasing disconnect between political reality and ideology. Together with multiple other leftist parties, the *Socialist Party* formed the Popular Front (Front populaire). In June 1936, Léon Blum formed the first cabinet under socialist leadership, supported by the Communists (Sternberger et al. 1969: 479; Wende 1981: 193).

Républicaine gauche

Original Name	Républicaine gauche
Other Names	Left Republican
Abbreviation	RepG
Factions	

The *Left Republicans*, also known as the “Alliance Démocratique”, was established in 1901. It served as the main center-right wing party in the Third Republic, embracing conservative liberalism as its guiding ideology. The *Alliance Démocratique* positioned itself as an opposition to both the socialist left and the right-wing factions. It firmly supported the principles of the republic and laicism. Hence, it took part in the right-wing National Bloc and cooperated mainly with the *Radical Socialist* party. The Left Republicans rejected extreme ideologies and emphasized the defense of institutions and the interests of the middle class.

The party’s unity began to disintegrate in the mid-thirties. Internally, the *Alliance Démocratique* consisted of two main factions: the pacifist majority led by Flandin and a more radical minority led by Reynaud. These factions represented different approaches and perspectives within the party, contributing to its eventual downfall.

Conservateurs

Original Name	Conservateurs
Other Names	Conservatives
Abbreviation	C
Factions	

The *Conservatives* were a parliamentary group of right-wing independents and small parties.

Parti radical-socialiste

Original Name	Parti radical-socialiste
Other Names	Radical Socialist Party
Abbreviation	PR
Factions	

Founded in 1901, the *Radical Socialist Party* was a centrist coalition of conservatives to social democrats. The Radicals had a major influence on the government system of the Third Republic. Initially associated with the extreme left, the Radicals gradually moved towards the center as they started gaining support from voters in the rural area. Their main support, however, came from the urban population. In the interwar period, they adapted a center-left position. This means that while the Radicals remained focused on political reforms, they firmly rejected the economic and social interventions proposed by the Socialists. However, they still maintained their electoral alliances with the Socialists (Sternberger et al., 1969: 479).

Union républicaine

Original Name	Union républicaine
Other Names	Republican Union, Republican Federation
Abbreviation	UR
Factions	Action Libérale Populaire

The *Republican Union* was also known as the *Republican Federation* (fédération républicaine) before 1928. It affiliated with the National Bloc and is the largest conservative

party. The party took the role of mediator between the parliamentary conservatives and the anti-republican nationalist right outside of parliament. One important group with the UR was the Action Libérale Populaire, an alliance of Catholics that accepted the legality of the Third Republic. When Louis Marin took over leadership in 1925, the loose bond of political groups transformed into a united party. With the electoral victory of the centre-left in 1924, the religious right and the ultra-nationalist wing in the party gained power and the UR shifted to the right.

Parti communiste française

Original Name	Parti communiste française
Other Names	French Communist Party
Abbreviation	PCF
Factions	

Founded in 1920 by splitting from the *Socialist Party*, the *Communist Party* strictly followed the positions and ideas of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Under the leadership of Marcel Cachin and Ludovic-Oscar Frossard, the party did not succeed in gaining a strong position in parliament as it was severely weakened by internal disputes. The *Communist Party* was not part of the Cartel of the Left (Cartel des Gauches). Under the leadership of Maurice Thorez, the party moved closer and closer to the ideas and ideology of the Soviet ideal and in particular to the ideas of Stalin. As a result, the party increasingly fell into isolation. After their lowest election turnout in 1932 the Communist Party approached the *Socialist Party* in order to prioritize the battle against fascism and changed their anti-parliamentary stance. While they continued to refuse joining the government, the party supported the politics of the Popular Front (Front populaire) (Wende, 1981: 183).

Parti démocrate populaire

The *Popular Democratic Party* (PDP) was a small christian democratic party found in 1924 by deputies from the National Bloc. It represented French social Catholicism with

Original Name	Parti démocrate populaire
Other Names	Popular Democratic Party
Abbreviation	PDP
Factions	

the idea that Catholicism should not draw a line between left and right and that being Catholic and supporting the Republic were not mutually exclusive. It opposed economic liberalism, socialism and French laïcité and aimed at achieving social justice through Catholic social programs. The PDP stood in direct competition to the Republican Union, but had only little weight in the governments between 1926 and 1932. With the crisis of government instability in 1934 it gradually shifted to the center-right. Its presidents were Geroges Thibout (1924 to 1929) and Auguste Champetier de Ribes (1929 to 1940).

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