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## Original Article

# Four rounds in a row: The impact of presidential election outcomes on legislative elections in France

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**Abstract** This article focuses on the consequences of presidential election outcomes on legislative election results in the context of the French semi-presidential regime. Through an analysis based on aggregated national- and constituency-level data, it shows that presidential elections do have an impact on legislative elections. Furthermore, this impact is proven to affect the balance between presidential majority and opposition coalitions and between core and fringe parties. The 2000 and 2002 reforms aligning presidential and National Assembly mandates and instituting a situation of repeated honeymoon elections significantly decrease the likelihood of any future period of cohabitation between a president and an Assembly from opposing partisan coalitions. They also foster presidentialization and explain the relative decrease in fragmentation within the party system.

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## Introduction

On 24 September 2000, a referendum approved President Chirac's proposal to reduce the French presidential term from 7 to 5 years. Despite an apparent agreement on this constitutional change, the actual support for it was less clear-cut. The large majority (73.2 per cent) of people who voted 'yes' represented a mere 18.5 per cent of all registered voters. Turnout reached the lowest level ever in the Fifth Republic, at only 30.19 per cent, and more than 16 per cent of the ballots were spoiled. Indeed, the political elite itself



was rather ambivalent about this reform. Even if a broad consensus was achieved on the principle of the reform, the initiative itself came from outside: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a former French president, put the issue on the political agenda. Jacques Chirac's prime minister in a period of '*cohabitation*', the socialist Lionel Jospin, endorsed the idea, which came from one of the president's greatest enemies. Jacques Chirac triggered the referendum because he could not see how to oppose such an idea and/or because he thought it could help his plan to stand during the next presidential election by calling for a second but shortened term.

The decision had tremendous consequences for the semi-presidential regime of the Fifth Republic. It brought the mandates of both the National Assembly and the president into alignment. Furthermore, in 2002, these terms coincided for the first time. The legislative election was to be held just a few weeks before the presidential election. However, in a strategic move, Lionel Jospin decided to postpone the legislative election by 2 months, so that it followed the presidential election by 4 weeks. He believed that his only chance of securing a socialist majority in the National Assembly depended on his election as president (Jérôme *et al.*, 2003).

This article focuses on the expected consequences of these two major shifts in the French institutional model. Our main assumption is that both changes led to the actual transformation of the working of the political system, because of its presidentialization and the transformation of the party system into a quasi two-party system. As *cohabitation* has been a major issue in French politics (Parodi, 1997; Elgie, 2002) since the 1980s, and because the 2000–2002 reforms explicitly aimed at avoiding future *cohabitation* as far as possible, we examine the likelihood that a 'newly elected' president is certain to be supported by a congruent majority in the National Assembly.

The question is linked to the wider theory of the timing of elections and electoral cycles<sup>1</sup> (Shugart and Carey, 1992; Smith, 2004) that provide the general theoretical framework of this article. More precisely, we build on Shugart and Carey's (1992) analysis of the interactions among outcomes of legislative and presidential elections in presidential or semi-presidential regimes. The hypothesis is primarily that the relative timing of these elections is important in assessing the likelihood of any form of divided government emerging. If both elections are held in a short period of time, it is likely that both the President and the majority in Parliament will be the same. There are two main explanations for this: first, the two elections are held in the same context and are hence more likely to produce the same outcome; second, the result of the first election in time (and possibly the anticipation of the outcome of the second election) has consequences for the subsequent election because of bandwagon dynamics, spillover effects and the fact that voters may have preferences as to the grouped result of both elections rather than considering



each election independently (that is voters may, for instance, want to avoid a situation of divided government).<sup>2</sup>

To analyse the effects of the outcomes of presidential elections on the legislative elections, this research is based on the aggregated results of French elections collected at the national and constituency levels, since the first direct presidential election in 1965. Over the last five decades of the French Fifth Republic (before and after the 2000 and 2002 electoral calendar reforms), almost all possible configurations of timing between presidential and legislative elections have occurred. Despite a rather limited number of cases (only eight presidential elections), we contend that France provides a unique set of data to test for the effects of election timing and to discover steadfast rules prescribing how presidential outcomes feed legislative dynamics. Our study of course takes into account the fact that the party system itself has changed between the sixties and the present (Sauger, 2009).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The second section deals with the two institutional reforms that have *de facto* linked presidential and legislative elections. The third section tracks shifts in electoral performance for various parties with respect to the different cycles. The fourth section looks at the effects of local logic on legislative elections. It assesses the impact of territorial dispersion on the parties' performance. The fifth section outlines a general model for forecasting legislative results for the parties from the outcomes of the first round of the presidential election. The sixth section concludes on the relative influence of the different effects created by the 2000–2002 reforms and proposes some hypotheses for the effects of election timing.

## National Elections and French Institutions

### French electoral rules for presidential and legislative elections

As a semi-presidential regime, the French Fifth Republic is characterized by the coexistence of direct presidential and legislative elections. With the exception of the 1986 legislative election, presidential and legislative elections are based on almost identical electoral formulas that belong to the large family of majority systems. French presidents are elected through a *majority-runoff system* that organizes a second and final ballot if no candidate obtains a majority after the first ballot. The runoff ballot is held between the two candidates who receive the highest number of votes on the first ballot. Legislative elections follow a two-round majority plurality system with a second and final ballot if no candidate obtains a majority on the first ballot. A threshold of 12.5 per cent of registered voters decides who among the



first round of candidates will be allowed to stand during the second round.<sup>3</sup> The winner is the candidate who secures a plurality of the votes. The main consequence of majority-runoff electoral systems, at least in the French context, has been the bipolarization of the party system (Parodi, 1997).<sup>4</sup>

From 1965 to 2002, the system experienced only three periods of *cohabitation*<sup>5</sup> for a total of 9 years out of 37 in the entire period. In fact, this can also be explained by the overall electoral dominance of the right from the 1960s to the late 1970s. *Cohabitations* quickly appeared after the first alternation in office in 1981.

The 2002 reform led to a crucial re-ordering of the electoral cycle, so that legislative elections now follow presidential elections. Otherwise, ‘counter-honeymoon’ elections, as Shugart and Carey (1992) label them, would have fostered the parliamentary character of the regime rather than speeding up its presidentialization. Yet, the new calendar introduced by the 2002 reform has not been ‘constitutionalized’. This means that the two types of election may be once again disconnected in the future – if the president should die, for instance. However, such a backward shift remains unlikely in the long run, as long as the president maintains the power to break up the Assembly, and as long as the presidentialist reading of the constitution persists.

### **The impact of election timing and the significance of the 2000 and 2002 reforms**

The question of election timing introduced by the 2000 and 2002 reforms cannot be directly compared to the British situation. In his study of the Westminster system, Alastair Smith shows that early British general elections are uncommon, and might be considered as *a signal leaders lack confidence in their future performance* (Smith, 2004, p. 5). The first two French cases of early legislative elections (the 1981 and 1988 dissolutions) were not the result of such pessimism. They aimed to ensure that the presidential and legislative majorities would be from the same political camp at the very beginning of the new presidential term, so that the newly elected president would be provided with a steady working majority to govern with.

The president’s power to call a legislative election for strategic reasons has, however, seldom been used in France. In 1974, for instance, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who had just been elected president, decided to accept and cope with an Assembly dominated by the Gaullist parliamentary group rather than dissolve the Assembly.<sup>6</sup> In 1995, Jacques Chirac also promised his followers that he would not dissolve the Assembly. Chirac used this as an argument to convince the RPR and UDF deputies to campaign for him once polls made him a credible challenger against the incumbent Gaullist Prime Minister,



Edouard Balladur.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the National Assembly has only been dissolved four times: in 1968, because of the so-called *événements de mai*; in 1981 and 1988 after the election of François Mitterrand as president because the right was dominant in the previously elected National Assembly; and in 1997.

This 1997 case is in fact the only time the president has called for a legislative election before the due date, using his power of dissolution to shape the electoral agenda much as British prime ministers are used to doing. Indeed, the 1997 dissolution was viewed as a strategic decision by President Chirac designed to provide his own partisan coalition with the best chance of winning the forthcoming election. It was also seen as the means by which he could gain a firmer grasp on his own camp at a time when his leadership was clearly under question. The decision was taken nearly 2 years after Chirac's election as president, at a moment when his presidential legitimacy was already tempered (Carcassonne, 1995). However, the plan backfired and Chirac's fatal error in calling for a legislative election eventually led to the return of a left wing majority in the new Assembly.

As analysed by Shugart and Carey (1992), the question of the political use of election timing is much more relevant for the French case. They distinguish honeymoon legislative elections, held during the first year of a new presidential term, from midterm elections held afterwards. Based on a thorough comparative analysis, the two authors conclude by underlining the divergent political effects of honeymoon or midterm elections: *honeymoon elections are more likely than other electoral cycles to produce an Assembly majority for the just-elected president*, whereas *midterm elections go the farthest in weakening the impact of presidential elections over elections to the Assembly* (Shugart and Carey, 1992, pp. 263–265). These contrasting consequences are explained by a number of overlapping logics, which are not specifically explored in this article.

To come back to the French case, the 2000 and 2002 reforms obviously foster the presidentialization of the regime (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), as the president's election inaugurates the whole process of allocating power. We argue that newly elected presidents can rely on the election of a working majority in the National Assembly 2 months after their own election, assuming that the president successfully campaigns for the partisan coalition that has just supported her/him. As Cox points out, *within individual legislative constituencies, voters and parties need to coalesce in order to convert their votes into legislative seats more efficiently* (Cox, 1997, p. 203). We argue that the newly elected president is the right person to help the new partisan coalition win at both the local and the national level: s/he is the most prominent political leader to provide nationwide support to build the legislative coalition s/he needs to support the incoming government.



## Election Timing and Its Political Effects on Legislative Elections

### A classification of electoral cycles based on election timing

Given that France is a semi-presidential system with both direct legislative and presidential elections, we propose here to map the configurations under which the allocation of power has been processed. Eleven electoral cycles<sup>8</sup> have been formed by presidential and legislative elections throughout the five decades of the history of the Fifth Republic with respect to the period of time that separates a legislative election from the previous presidential election (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows the three types of electoral cycles based on the election timing that we have delineated. The first type, with honeymoon legislative elections, includes four cases that took place before and after the 2000–2002 reforms. The second type of electoral cycle concerns midterm legislative elections and includes the same number of cases as the first type. As a result of the use of presidential power to dissolve the Assembly and the different lengths of presidential and legislative terms before 2000, a third type of electoral cycle should also be pointed out. There are only three cases of these and each cycle began and ended with a legislative election. Within this third type, the first cycle began with the just-in-time 1967 election and ended with the unexpected 1968 election held after General de Gaulle’s decision to dissolve the Assembly with the hope of putting a stop to the ‘*événements de mai 1968*’.<sup>9</sup> The other two cycles of this type (1981–1986 and 1988–1993) began as a result of the

**Table 1:** Three types of electoral cycles from 1965 to 2007

<i>Types of electoral cycles</i>	<i>With honeymoon legislative elections</i>	<i>With midterm legislative elections</i>	<i>From one legislative election to the next</i>
Between 1965 and 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1981 P and L</li> <li>● 1988 P and L</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1965 (P) to 1967 (L)</li> <li>● 1969 (P) to 1973 (L)</li> <li>● 1974 (P) to 1978 (L)</li> <li>● 1995 (P) to 1997 (L)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1967 (L) to 1968 (L)</li> <li>● 1981 (L) to 1986 (L)</li> <li>● 1988 (L) to 1993 (L)</li> </ul>
From 2000 to nowadays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2002 P and L</li> <li>● 2007 P and L</li> </ul>	—	—
Number of cases	Four cases: Two before the 2000 law Two after the 2000 law	Four cases	Three cases

*Abbreviations:* P = Presidential election; L = Legislative election.

*Note:* The 1967–1968 cycle is excluded from any subsequent analysis because of its peculiarity.



dissolution of the Assembly following the election of President Mitterrand (1981 and 1988). They ended with a just-in-time midterm legislative election, and led to periods of cohabitation. This third category of cycle is indeed heterogeneous. The former can be seen as exceptional, whereas the two latter cycles are in fact what is generally considered cycles ending with midterm elections. Because the 1967–1968 cycle is exceptional, it is excluded from any subsequent analysis. The 1981–1986 and 1988–1993 cycles are here considered as a ‘control group’. The premise of this article is to look at the transformation of electoral outcomes from presidential elections to legislative elections; in this regard, these two cycles make it possible to more precisely assess the specific impact of the presidential elections and the differences between presidential and legislative elections beyond changes in the context or the stake of elections.

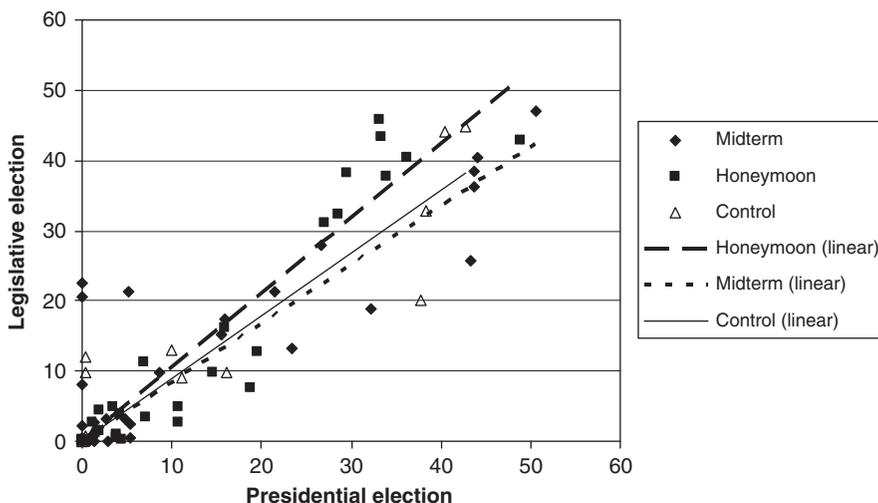
The second type of electoral cycle, including midterm legislative elections, is more interesting than it might at first appear to be. Three of the four cases began or ended with an unexpected call for elections. Neither the 1965 nor the 1969 presidential election was planned when the early legislative elections took place: that in 1965 was the result of a successful referendum that ushered in the constitutional reform that provided for the direct election of the president; that in 1969 was the result of President de Gaulle’s resignation after the failure of the referendum on reforms to the French state.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the election in 1974 was the result of President Pompidou’s unexpected death.

Moving on from this classification of electoral cycles, we will now examine the extent to which election timing affects legislative outcomes.

### **The political impact of election timing on legislative elections**

Let us now assess the extent to which the 2000 and 2002 reforms introduced a seminal disruption in the way the French electoral system works and whether these reforms have altered the structure of competition between parties.

In order to begin an analysis of the relationship between presidential results and honeymoon or midterm legislative elections, Figure 1 plots the national results for each party or partisan family after the presidential election or the first legislative election for the control group (*x*-axis) and after the subsequent legislative election (*y*-axis).<sup>11</sup> In order to take the fragmented design of the French system of parties into account, we have worked at the level of parties – such as the PCF – and of families of parties. This notion of families of parties describes aggregations of parties based on ideological or political proximities at a precise political moment. It should be underlined that those parties are not necessarily allied, as is the case for a party coalition, and that the scope of a family may shift from one election to another.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 1:** Electoral results for party families in the two first rounds of electoral cycles.

*Notes:* Regression results (OLS regression, all coefficients are significant at .01 level):

- Midterm:  $y = 0.835x$ ;  $R^2 = 0.698$  (if three outliers are dropped,  $y = 0.829$ ;  $R^2 = 0.919$ )
- Honeymoon:  $y = 1,06x$ ;  $R^2 = 0.897$
- Control:  $y = 0.893x$ ;  $R^2 = 0.825$ .

The results shown by this graph are quite clear-cut. As expected, legislative elections are not independent of the outcomes of the preceding presidential election even in the case of midterm elections. For midterm legislative elections, core parties have poorer performances while the regression line for honeymoon elections is far steeper. For instance, a family of parties representing 40 per cent of the votes in the presidential election is expected to win 43 per cent in the case of a honeymoon election but only 34 per cent in a midterm election. In other words, core parties benefit from honeymoon elections whether or not they are part of the presidential majority, whereas smaller parties benefit from midterm elections. This result in fact confirms previous analyses showing that the fragmentation of the party system is greater in the case of midterm elections and is minimal in honeymoon elections (Sauger, 2009). The ‘control group’ (which is constituted by groups of two legislative elections and close to the notion of midterm elections and has thus to be compared to the ‘midterm’ group) shows that presidential elections amplify the width of electoral changes. Despite the fact that the ‘control group’ includes the historical defeat of the Socialist Party (PS) in 1993, the regression coefficient between the results of the two elections of this group is significantly higher when compared to the ‘midterm’ group.



Table 2 provides more detailed information on this relationship between two elections belonging to the same electoral cycle. It presents the correlations between the presidential and legislative scores of parties (or families of parties) at the constituency level. The values of Pearson's  $r$  coefficients computed at the local level<sup>13</sup> for each partisan family (or party) and for each couple of presidential and legislative elections show the interdependent relationship between the outcomes of the two elections, irrespective of the type of electoral cycle they belong to. Three precise conclusions may be drawn from Table 2.

First, if we consider two elections belonging to the same electoral cycle, the value of the Pearson coefficients varies in accordance with the nature of each party or family of parties whatever the couple of national elections might be. Fringe parties such as the Communist party (PCF) or the Extreme Right Wing family (ExR) tend to benefit from steady geographical and political structures. Therefore, they are not very sensitive to the issue of election timing.

Second, the Right Wing (RW) family, structured by the Union pour la Démocratie Française (Union for French Democracy) (UDF) and Rassemblement pour la République (Rally for the Republic) (RPR) in the past and the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (Union for the Presidential Majority) (UMP) at present, is much more sensitive to shifts in the partisan system throughout the period. Until 1978 and Giscard d'Estaing's decision to found a party – the UDF – bringing together all the smaller movements belonging to the non-Gaullist or centre-right families, the (RW) family was weakened by rivalries between the centre and the RW. The values of the Pearson correlations for the 1965/1967 electoral cycle reached 0.64 when General de Gaulle himself represented the RW in the 1965 presidential election. But the Pearson coefficient collapsed down to 0.28 during the next 1967/1969 electoral cycle when two candidates belonging to the same RW family both of whom had an equally high level of notoriety<sup>14</sup> competed in the 1969 presidential election. However, since the 1978 legislative election, Pearson's  $r$ -values for the RW family of parties have always exceeded 0.80 whatever the type of electoral cycle. This indicates the great ability of the RW family to mobilize its composite electorate again whatever the political context of the national elections might be. It should be underlined that for legislative elections between 1978 and 2002, the UDF and RPR succeeded in proposing a sole and common candidate for both parties in each constituency, with only a small number of exceptions.

Third, unlike the RW family of parties, the ability of left wing parties or party families to hold on to voters from one election to the next seems to be much more dependent on the type of electoral cycle concerned. In the case of midterm legislative elections, correlations between the PCF scores at presidential and legislative elections reach or surpass 0.75, despite the fact that for both the 1965 and 1974 presidential elections the PCF chose to endorse

**Table 2:** Correlations between scores obtained by party families from presidential to subsequent legislative elections at constituency level

Type of electoral cycle	Electoral cycles	ExL	PCF	NCL	Centre	RW	ExR	N cases	Pres majority	Leg majority
With honeymoon legislative elections	P81/L81	0.08	0.94	0.77	—	0.95	—	474	L	L
	P88/L88	0.31	0.92	0.78	—	0.89	0.92	555	L	L
	P2002/L2002	0.49	0.76	0.57	—	0.86	0.92	555	R	R
	P2007/L2007	0.38	0.77	0.73	0.68	0.83	0.76	555	R	R
With midterm legislative elections	P65/L67	—	0.75 <sup>a</sup>	0.49 <sup>b</sup>	0.54	0.64	0.72	470	R	R
	P69/L73	0.52	0.94	0.52	0.29	0.28	—	473	R	R
	P74/L78	0.10	0.84 <sup>a</sup>	0.28 <sup>b</sup>	—	0.91	0.16	474	R	R
	P95/L97	0.35	0.89	0.70	—	0.93	0.92	555	R	L

<sup>a</sup>Correlation Mitterrand 1965 or 1974 / PC 1967 or 1978.<sup>b</sup>Correlation Mitterrand 1965 or 1974/ PS 1967 or 1978.*Abbreviations:* Pres = Presidential election; Leg = Legislative election; L = Left wing majority; R = Right wing majority.

For the names of the columns see footnote 13.



François Mitterrand's candidacy rather than to present its own candidate. Before François Mitterrand built a new party – the PS – the old socialist movement – the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (French section of the workers' international organization) (SFIO) – which provided most of the non-Communist candidates, was a parochial party that gave a great deal of autonomy to its grassroots activists in the choice of legislative candidates. The political heterogeneity of those candidates for the 1967 legislative election goes a long way in explaining the weak value of the Pearson coefficients. Compare the 1967 legislative election results to the 1965 presidential election results (0.49) when Mitterrand declared himself as the candidate supported by all the leftist movements. For a long time after the foundation of the PS, the relationship between the presidential and legislative structures of the Non-Communist Left family (NCL) remained unsteady and weak. They were always weaker than those of the RW family: the value of the Pearson coefficient was 0.52 for the 1969–1973 cycle and collapsed to 0.28 for the 1974–1978 cycle, even though the left wing allied parties<sup>15</sup> had begun to coordinate with the perspective of Mitterrand's presidential victory in 1981. Therefore, Mitterrand's decision to dissolve the Assembly after his presidential victories of 1981 and 1988 provided the opportunity to his party – the PS – to benefit from his own success at the expense of its closer allies: Pearson coefficient values reached 0.77 and 0.78, and remain the highest values the PS has ever reached.

The differences in correlations between the RW family on the one hand and the NCL family on the other are partly explained by the more or less volatile nature of each block throughout the 1965–2007 period. During this time, correlations were rather low for the RW family, while the centre (which was actually more a centre-right group) had significant electoral results, as in the 1965/1967 and even the 1969/1973 electoral cycles. The NCL family, and especially the PS, appear to be much more fragile than their (RW) UMP challenger throughout the period.

There are several reasons for this situation. The main explanation is the fragmentation of the NCL family. Given the fact that the PS alone is unable to reach a majority of seats in the Assembly, it has needed to build electoral – and governmental – alliances for many years now. These have to be renewed after each new electoral appointment, given that all the PS leftist partners are weak (such as the PCF today) or weakly structured movements without solid national organizations (such as the Greens). Or indeed they may be local notables who seek support from the PS to increase their chances of being elected.

The second reason is that the PS has gradually lost its close relationship with the working classes and has become one of the preferred parties of middle-class voters, who are among the most volatile social categories of voters. The PS therefore currently suffers from the tendency of those middle- (and sometimes upper-) class voters to cast their vote in favour of attractive



fringe parties. The shaky relationship between the PS and its partners might be considered a structural weakness as compared to the UMP's capacity to organize its own camp.

These results confirm the significance of the timing of elections in forecasting the results of legislative elections. Midterm and honeymoon elections are both closely related to the outcomes of the preceding presidential election but to the benefit of different parties or party families depending on whether the election is a honeymoon or a midterm one. However, the effect of election timing is not sufficient to understand the shift in the structures of political competition from the presidential to the legislative elections. A closer look at the logic of the legislative elections is therefore necessary to assess the embedded impacts of the timing and territorial distribution of electoral competition.

### **From Presidential Success to a Legislative Working Majority**

In contrast to presidential elections based on a single configuration of candidates for a single national constituency, legislative elections are held with a great diversity of candidate configurations. In theory, these can be as numerous as the number of constituencies in which deputies are elected. Not all parties that have just supported a presidential candidate put forward a candidate in each constituency as a result of financial or organizational difficulties or sometimes local or national trade-offs. For instance, since 1997, the PCF has no longer been in a position to put a candidate forward in each constituency.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, some parties that are not in a position to put a presidential candidate forward or to have legislative candidates everywhere nevertheless present candidates in some constituencies as a result of resources provided by local grassroots activists.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, for a newly elected president the probability of reaching a working majority of seats in the new Assembly in order to initiate new legislation depends on the final balance between 577 local outcomes.<sup>18</sup> With respect to this assumption, each constituency has a specific political identity that prevents the outcomes of the legislative election from exactly replicating the national political tendency confirmed by the presidential election. We therefore take this situation into account as a 'local variable', and argue that it is powerful enough to affect the outcomes of each constituency to a greater or lesser degree, all the more so as the power of this variable differs between honeymoon and midterm elections.<sup>19</sup>

The question is now that of whether the influence of the local variable is powerful enough to significantly modify the score of a party from one constituency to another. The results shown in Table 3 confirm, first, that the influence of the local variable is much more significant for legislative than for presidential elections.

**Table 3:** Standard deviation of scores within party families with respect to election timing

	<i>ExL</i>	<i>PCF</i>	<i>NCL</i>	<i>RW</i>	<i>ExR</i>
<i>Electoral cycle with honeymoon legislative elections</i>					
Average standard deviation for presidential elections	2.4	3.6	4.9	6.8	4.7
Average standard deviation for legislatives elections	1.3	8.0	8.9	10.5	4.1
Difference between presidential and legislative elections	-1.1	+4.4	+4.0	+3.7	-0.6
<i>Electoral cycle with midterm legislative elections</i>					
Average standard deviation for presidential elections	2.9	6.2	6.1	10.7	2.0
Average standard deviation for legislatives elections	2.3	8.6	9.1	10.7	2.8
Difference between presidential and legislative elections	-0.6	+2.4	+3.0	—	+0.8

Second, core partisan families are much more sensitive to the effects of the local variable than fringe partisan families. For legislative elections, their territorial variations may reach more than 10 times the value of the standard deviation in the case of the RW family and almost 10 times the standard deviation in the case of the PCF or the NCL family. For electoral cycles with honeymoon legislative elections, increases in standard deviations from the presidential election to the subsequent legislative election are impressive: approximately +4 points for each partisan family.

As has just been suggested, the influence of the local variable varies from one party to another. According to our research question, the most important result is that the current institutionalization of electoral cycles with honeymoon legislative elections reinforces the territorial dispersion of the results of legislative elections. It therefore balances the national political influence of the newly elected presidential coalition on the legislative election. Compared to electoral cycles with midterm elections, the value of the standard deviation for each core party or party family increases significantly: from 2.4 to 4.4 for the PCF, from 3.0 to 4.0 for the NCL coalition, and from 0 to 3.7 for the RW coalition.

Obviously, the local variable provides some autonomy to legislative elections with respect to presidential influence. Unlike presidential elections, which are ruled by a national institutional issue, thus weakening territorial political disparities, legislative elections are much better balanced between national and local issues. When legislative elections do not carry a national political message that has just been addressed by means of the presidential election (as is the case for honeymoon elections), the influence of local variables on the outcomes of the election would reach a maximum were it not hidden behind a low turnout. In contrast, when legislative elections have a national message to deliver to the president and his government, as midterm elections do, local disparities are



overtaken by the national issue central to the election, added to the fact that turnout rises.

## **Modelling Legislative Election Performance from Presidential Outcomes**

It is clear from the previous analyses that the outcome of legislative elections is linked to the outcome of the preceding presidential election but also depends on the timing of the electoral cycle. This section systematizes these observations by modelling the results of legislative elections from a limited set of explanatory variables chosen to describe both the outcomes of the preceding elections and the type of electoral cycles to which the legislative elections belong.

The analysis strategy is rather straightforward. Using a simple OLS model, we regress the result of each party family or party in the first round of a legislative election<sup>20</sup> on the results of the preceding presidential election; the difference in turnout between presidential and legislative elections; the winner of the presidential race; and the type of legislative election involved: honeymoon or midterm.<sup>21</sup> In addition, we hypothesize that the effect of midterm or honeymoon elections on the core parties is variable according to their affiliation or opposition to the presidential majority coalition. Using two dummies, the regressions also take into account the interaction between the type of legislative election and support for the elected president: midterm majority and honeymoon majority. We also added a control variable to allow for the effect of turnout variation from the presidential election to the subsequent legislative election. Another control variable has been added through the score obtained by the parties during the preceding legislative election. Despite obvious co-linearity problems with the results of the presidential election, this variable nonetheless shows interesting results, consistent with models in which it is dropped. The regression model takes thus into account all dimensions discussed earlier in this paper. The descriptive statistics of all metric variables in this model are presented in Table 4.

We ran these regressions for the period 1973–2007, with the exception of the 1978 elections. The first and third electoral cycles are excluded because the PCF did not run any candidate for the 1965 or the 1974 presidential elections. We ran specific regressions for the PCF and the ExR family for a more restricted period (1988–2007), so that the level of support for these parties would be coherent throughout the period. Table 5 shows the results of the five regressions.

The first striking result is that the outcomes of the legislative elections subsequent to a presidential election depend more on the results of the previous legislative election than the results of the prior presidential election whatever

**Table 4:** Descriptive statistics of electoral results by party grouping

	<i>RW</i>		<i>NCL</i>		<i>ExL</i>		<i>PCF (1988–2007)</i>		<i>ExR (1988–2007)</i>	
	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Legislative score	0.20	0.85	0.01	0.71	0.00	0.64	0.00	0.49	0.00	0.38
Presidential score	0.16	0.92	0.02	0.48	0.02	0.54	0.00	0.29	0.06	0.34
Previous legislative election score	0.20	0.88	0.01	0.69	0.00	0.60	0.00	0.47	0.09	0.38
Difference in turnout	-0.45	0.28	-0.11	0.28	-0.11	0.28	-0.45	0.08	-0.14	0.08
<i>N</i>			3721		3722		3722		2775	

**Table 5:** OLS regression modelling party scores for legislative elections (first round) depending on election timing (1973–2007)

	<i>RW</i>		<i>NCL</i>		<i>ExL</i>		<i>PCF (1988–2007)</i>		<i>ExR (1988–2007)</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>sign</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>sign</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>sign</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>sign</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>sign</i>
Constant	-0.02	***	-0.00		-0.08	***	-0.04	***	-0.03	***
Presidential score	0.32	***	0.52	***	0.55	***	0.5	***	0.71	***
Previous legislative election score	0.63	***	0.56	***	0.59	***	0.69	***	0.2	***
Difference in turnout	-0.09	***	0.08	***	-0.07	***	-0.06	***	0.04	***
Midterm, opposition	0.04	***	0.06	***	0.04	***	0.04	***	0.05	***
Midterm, majority	-0.05	***	-0.09	***	0.02	***	0.01	***	—	—
Honeymoon, majority	0.09	***	0.06	***	0.01	***	0.02	***	—	—
Honeymoon, opposition	0.04	***	0.03	***	-0.04	***	-0.04	—	-0.05	***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.74	—	0.71	—	0.87	—	0.85	—	0.86	—

Coefficients have to be multiplied by 100 to be read in percentage points.

\*\*\* *P* value < 0.01

Note: The four variables Midterm/Honeymoon – Opposition/Majority reflect the four possible positions for any party entering the electoral race. Coefficient values are here capturing the ‘net’ effect of the position.



the party or the party family might be, with the single exception of the ExR family. The case of the RW party family is the most surprising. The coefficient of the previous legislative score is the highest, reaching 0.63, whereas the presidential coefficient reaches only 0.32. If the score of the previous legislative election is dropped from this model, the coefficient for the presidential election obviously increases. However, dropping this variable leads the  $R^2$  of the regression to drop from 0.74 to a mere 0.58. This observation underlines the significant role of the local variable. The political orientation of the incumbent deputy, the level of the party's competitiveness, and the strategies of the parties or the candidates in each constituency as summarized in the local variable are all significant components of the constituency's history and contribute to the shaping of results in the legislative election.

However, the logic of the previous election remains important: both presidential and legislative coefficients are strongly positive and significant. For all left wing parties, both previous elections are similar, especially in the case of the NCL (0.52 and 0.56) and the Extreme Left (ExL) family (0.55 and 0.59). In contrast, legislative scores obtained by ExR candidates depend essentially on Jean Marie Le Pen's presidential scores (0.71), showing that the *Front national* is in fact the only party capable of structuring this party family. Since 1988, it has had a national strategy of fielding candidates in every constituency, thus presenting a coherent supply throughout the territory. In addition, the personality of Jean Marie Le Pen provides a key to understanding the success of the ExR at national level despite the fact that the FN is not strongly rooted at the local level.

The significant role of the election timing variable is confirmed. Midterm elections are always profitable for core parties outside the presidential majority. They all gain consistently from 3.5 per cent to 5.6 per cent when they are outsiders. In contrast, honeymoon elections favour parties belonging to the presidential majority. This is especially the case for the RW party family, which increases its score by 9 per cent in honeymoon elections, whereas the PCF and the NCL party family experience much more limited gains (2 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively). Fourth, midterm elections are uncomfortable situations for all parties that support the presidential majority, and the NCL party family loses much more – approximately 9 per cent of its previous score – than the RW party family, which loses only 5 per cent. Fringe parties seem less hampered, the ExL family winning on average 2 per cent and the PCF 0.5 per cent.

In other words, the honeymoon-majority and the midterm-majority situations are symmetrical, both having an effect on the balance between majority and opposition blocks, as well as on the balance between fringe and core parties.

These results allow the important obstacle represented by midterm elections for any majority to be underlined. To avoid any possibility of cohabitation, the left wing coalition must be more than 10 per cent of votes ahead of the



RW opposition after the presidential election (this prediction of course does not take into account the effects of the electoral system and the geographical distribution of votes; as the electoral system is highly disproportional, these estimates can be read thus as a maximum of the minimum required to secure a majority). For the RW coalition, the necessary lead is limited to 5 per cent of the votes. With such results, it is easier to understand why the RW block remained in office for such a long time until the 1981 presidential election. In the same way, it could be suggested that at present when neither a Left Wing nor a RW party coalition is sure of dominating their opponents by 10 points at least after a presidential election, the institutionalization of the honeymoon legislative election seems to be the best way to stay in office for a full presidential term.

## Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, we argue that both the 2000 and 2002 reforms led to a significant re-ordering of the electoral system and in this way to a crucial reshaping of the way in which the French political system works. The literature on election timing and the notion of electoral cycles were especially useful to understand how and to what extent controlling the electoral calendar is an effective means of controlling the balance of powers between the president and the Assembly in a semi-presidential regime. In the French case, the institutionalization of electoral cycles that begin with a presidential election and are immediately followed by a honeymoon legislative election shifts the balance in favour of the president for two main reasons. The first is that the president's own election inaugurates the whole process of sharing out powers between the different bodies; the second is that with an early legislative election, presidents do not need to prove their capacity to govern. Both reasons increase the likelihood that a newly elected president will gain a working majority in the Assembly.

The empirical tests realized throughout an extended period of time (1965–2007) provide examples of various configurations of time between presidential and legislative elections, and allow three conclusions to be drawn.

First, all honeymoon elections favour the party coalition that has just supported the new president. The president is the right person to help a new national party coalition to win at the local level of the 577 constituencies that each elects its own MP.

Second, and more generally speaking, honeymoon legislative elections work in favour of core parties rather than fringe movements, which are often not solid enough to campaign for two elections occurring in such a short period of time. Therefore, honeymoon elections limit the tendency of the partisan system



towards fragmentation after the first round of both the presidential and legislative election.

Third, and regarding the question of whether or not the president is likely to obtain a working majority in the new Assembly, the most important feature of honeymoon elections is that they reinforce the territorial dispersion of party scores. Therefore, the national political influence of the newly elected presidential coalition could be counterbalanced by parties belonging to the presidential opposition if their candidates benefit from a solid local implementation. This was the case for the 2007 legislative election when the PS, whose candidate lost the presidential election, won more seats than expected during the subsequent legislative election.

To a large extent, it could be argued that the institutionalization of honeymoon legislative elections contributes to the steadiness of the political system. At a time when neither a left wing nor a RW presidential coalition is in a position to face a midterm election with a comfortable likelihood of giving the president a working majority of seats in the new Assembly, a honeymoon election may be an effective means of stabilizing presidential power until the end of the term of office.

Should newly elected presidents take it for granted that they will be supported by a working majority in the National Assembly? The likelihood of any cohabitation in the future has been reduced by the 2000 and 2002 reforms. Nevertheless, as long as the presidential power to dissolve the assembly is maintained, the possibility of a return of midterm legislative elections cannot be excluded, given the fact that they are far less hazardous than a referendum in solving a conflict between a president and some kind of extra parliamentary opposition, for instance. The model may well be the 1968 midterm election when de Gaulle used his power of dissolution to put an end to the *événements de mai*.

## Notes

- 1 We describe an electoral cycle as a period of time opened by a national election – presidential or legislative – and closed by the subsequent legislative election; this is a working definition for our purpose taking into account the characteristics of the Fifth Republic.
- 2 See, for instance, Dolez and Laurent (2009), who propose a more thorough classification of what people may have in mind in this kind of context.
- 3 This threshold has been in place since 1978. Therefore, the effect of the threshold is all the more drastic when turnout is low. From 1958 to 1962, it was fixed at 5 per cent of the votes; from 1967 to 1973, the threshold was fixed at 10 per cent of registered voters.
- 4 The 1974 presidential election is viewed as the moment when the bipolarizations definitively shaped the whole political system.
- 5 1986–1988; 1993–1995; 1997–2002.
- 6 Giscard was a member of a fringe Right Wing (RW) party allied to the powerful Gaullist party.



- 7 Edouard Balladur, who was also a member of the RPR, was François Mitterrand's prime minister when the 1995 presidential election was held. Unlike Jacques Chirac, he did not say anything during the campaign about the presidential power to break up the Assembly.
- 8 See footnote 1.
- 9 The Assembly elected in 1968 was a huge success for the RW parties that supported General de Gaulle's government.
- 10 Général de Gaulle proposed the introduction of a new level of administration: the regional level.
- 11 All electoral results used in this article were collected from the French Ministry of the Interior's official results.
- 12 The NCL always includes the PS but other members come and go, such as the PSU, whose candidates belonged to the Extreme Left Wing family until 1981 and then became members of the NCL. Another example is the *Verts* (Greens) who belonged to the non-classified family until 1995 and then became members of the NCL family. Until 2002, the (RW) family included different movements belonging to the Gaullist heritage, such as the RPR and movements belonging to the more traditional members of French RW families such as the UDF. Since the 2002 legislative election, the RW family has been structured by the UMP party surrounded by other weak movements. The Extreme Right Wing family (*ExR*) sometimes includes only Le Pen's party (the FN), but from time to time hosts the MNR party and/or other movements ideologically similar to the FN.
- 13 By local level we mean the level of legislative constituencies. The Pearson coefficient assesses the significance of the relationship between two series of data. Pearson's *R* coefficients focus on the structural relationship between two series of metric data without reference to how much each piece of data scores. Therefore, a political force might be analysed over a long period of time, irrespective of its tendency to increase (the *Front national*) or decrease (the PCF) throughout the period.
- 14 Alain Poher was the President of the Senate and was acting president of the Republic after President de Gaulle resigned; Georges Pompidou was the incumbent prime minister.
- 15 The allied parties were the PS, which was at the head of the coalition; the PCF as the more powerful partner; and the radical party Mouvement des radicaux de gauche (Left radicals' movement) (MRG), which was only significant in the South West of France. In addition to some *clubs*, such as that founded by Mitterrand –the *Convention des Institutions Republicaines* (CIR) – those parties were linked by a political pact that was much more than an electoral alliance, that is, a published governmental programme.
- 16 The number of communist candidates at legislative elections decreased from 97 per cent in 1997 to 92 per cent in 2007; before F. Mitterrand founded the PS, the socialist family was not able to put forward a candidate in each constituency (only 87 per cent in 1967). In contrast, the FN, which covered only 23 per cent of all constituencies in the 1981 legislative election, has been able to put forward a candidate in each metropolitan constituency since 1988; one or several candidates belonging to the Ex family has stood in each constituency since 2002. In contrast, the NW partisan family put candidates forward throughout the entire period.
- 17 This is the case for ecologist movements throughout the period and among these parties, more especially the Greens until they became members of the PS governmental coalition (1997).
- 18 The 577 seats in the Assembly are shared in the following way: 555 for metropolitan constituencies and 22 for overseas constituencies.
- 19 This study is only based on the results of metropolitan constituencies, whose number has grown from 474 to 555 (or 577 with overseas territories) since the mid-1960s.
- 20 This result is computed as a ratio of the number of valid votes cast.
- 21 The two variables (whether or not parties are part of the presidential majority, whether or not elections are midterm) are in fact captured through three dummies in the regression (midterm, midterm majority, honeymoon majority) that account for all possible cases.



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