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Data, Measures and Methods

When Does the Candidate Supported by the Median Voter Win? French Presidential Elections, 1965–2007

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Abramson (2008) shows that the candidate of the median voter in the French two-round presidential election in 2007 was François Bayrou, but that he did not win the election — for the simple reason that he was eliminated at the first round of the balloting and so was not one of the two finalists in the second round. Looking at all eight French presidential elections in the Fifth Republic, over the period 1965–2007, we consider how typical of French presidential elections this 2007 frustration of the median voter was. While we clearly confirm Abramson's conclusions that Bayrou was the candidate supported by the French median voter in the presidential election of 2007, we find this frustration of the preferences of the median voter an essentially unique occurrence in French presidential elections — at least once we take into account differential turnout on first and second round balloting. Using a stylized model of the French political spectrum involving five electoral blocs (extreme left, left, center, right, and extreme right), we then attempt to explain why an electoral system that offers no guarantee of picking a Condorcet winner, and which has a multiplicity of first round candidates, nonetheless seems to do well in selecting Condorcet winners.

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The Impact of the Double-Round Ballot on Electing the Candidate of Choice of the Median Voter

Treating French politics as essentially unidimensional in character,¹ and using a variety of data sources, Abramson (2007) shows that the candidate of the median vote in the French two-round presidential election² in 2007 was François Bayrou, a center right candidate, but that he did not win the election — for the simple reason that he was eliminated at the first round of the



balloting and so was not one of the two finalists in the second round. Looking at all eight French presidential elections in the Fifth Republic, over the period 1965–2007, we consider how typical of French presidential elections this 2007 frustration of the median voter was.

We will make use of a stylized picture of French party space, in which we identify in each election the major candidate from each of the five political groupings: extreme left, left, center,³ right, and extreme right.⁴ It is well known that the assumption of unidimensional single-peaked preferences guarantee the existence of a *majority winner*, that is, a candidate who can receive a majority (for an odd number of voters) in paired contest against each and every other alternative. For single-peaked unidimensional preference, this is the candidate who is preferred by the median voter (Downs, 1957; Black, 1958). We will use the results of voting on the first round to infer the location of this median-preferred candidate, but we will also take into account the fact that there are certain (near knife-edge) cases where actual or anticipated abstention through alienation on the second round of the election can change our classification of which candidate could win in pair-wise contest against any other.

It is also well known that most electoral methods, including the double-round ballot system, do not guarantee to select the majority winner (a.k.a. *Condorcet winner*) even when such a winner exists.⁵ On its face, there are reasons to expect that the double ballot used for French presidential elections will make it unlikely that a Condorcet winner will be chosen. The two-round electoral structure makes it likely that multiple candidates will contest the first round, and France has had a proliferation of first round candidates — more even than theory predicts (see, e.g., Cox, 1997). The theoretical literature leads us to expect that, *ceteris paribus*, the more parties that contest, the less likely it is that the candidate preferred by the median voter will have sufficient first round votes to make it into the second round. On the other hand, in the period in question, France has party competition that is shaped by two ideological blocs (*tendances*), which compete largely within themselves on the first round. Moreover, these two blocs have been of comparable size throughout the entire 1965–2007 period. This normally results in a situation in which the second round presidential competition is between a candidate of the left bloc and a candidate of the right bloc. The only clear exceptions are the anomaly of the 2002 election, where excessive dispersal of the votes on the (combined) left and growing strength on the (combined) right led to a contest between a candidate of the right (Chirac) and a candidate of the ultra-right (Le Pen), and the anomaly of the 1969 election where we had a second round contest between a candidate of the right and of the center right with no candidate of the left in the contest.

In the French double-ballot system, supporters of parties that have no chance to enter the second round can try to influence the policies of the



eventual winner, by supporting these parties (and their policies) at the first round. The two-round structure lowers the cost of voters casting sincere votes for the party closest to their ideology as long as voters can expect that a party close to their preferences (i.e., of their own *tendance*) will make it into the final competition. The second round of the French two-ballot system provides incentives for the two parties who make it to that round to appeal to a broader set of voters, including the median voter, and to form alliances with other parties in order to win the second round. The double-ballot electoral system also imposes a constraint on the strategy of political leaders who recognize the ultimate importance of the overall median voter. They must avoid the danger of being so oriented to winning the eventual two-candidate second round that they are eliminated at the first round, since when a candidate of the right wing (the left wing) shifts his or her political platform in the direction of the overall median voter s/he can expect to lose votes to more extreme parties of his/her own *tendance*.

In addition to looking at whether the candidate of the median voter wins office, we also examine the internal dynamics within the left bloc and within the right bloc to see how powerful/efficient are the median voters within each of these two blocs in insuring that a candidate of the bloc supported by the median voter within that bloc is the bloc's candidate in the second round. We argue that the two-bloc character of French political competition enhances the likelihood that a Condorcet winner will be chosen. In particular, we note that the most typical second round presidential contest in France has been between the candidates of the median party within each *tendance*, with the winner being the party closer to the overall median.

Findings

Tabular overview of the French presidential election data, 1965–2007

To examine how French presidential competition played itself out over the 1965–2007 period, we will look at the distribution of votes at each presidential election since 1965 across the five ideological blocs — identifying both overall and within-bloc median locations.⁶ In Table 1 we also identify the leading candidate of each of the five blocs, and specify his/her vote share, and identify which two candidates made it into the second round and who was the winner.

Selecting the candidate preferred by the median voter

It is interesting to see how well, in practice, the French double-ballot system has done in selecting majority winners over the past eight presidential elections. In order for the majority winner to succeed, it must make it into the second

Table 1. Ideological bloc vote shares and shares of major candidates on the first round and winners and runners-up on the second round. French presidential elections, 1965-2007

	1965	1969	1974	1981	1988	1995	2002	2007
Extrême gauche	1.2	27.2	3.38	24.82	11.22	14.22	26.71	11.72
	Barbu	Duclos PC (21.3)	Laguiller (2.33)	Marchais (15.34)	Lajoie (6.75)	Hue (8.64)	Laguiller (5.72)	Besancenot (4.08)
Gauche	33.4	5	44.56	25.85	41.58	26.62	16.18	27.77
	Mitterrand (PS+PC)	Defferre	Mitterrand (43.24)	Mitterrand (25.85)	Mitterrand (34.11)	Jospin (23.3)	Jospin (16.18)	Royale (25.87)
Centre	15.6	23.3	32.6	28.31	16.54	29.84	6.84	18.57
	Lecanuet	Polher	Giscard d'Estaing (32.6)	Giscard d'Estaing (28.31)	Barre (16.54)	Chirac (26.84)	Bayrou (6.84)	Bayrou (18.57)
Droite	44.6	44.5	18.67	20.98	19.96	23.32	31.09	13.4
	De Gaulle	Pompidou	Chaban- Delmas (15.1)	Chirac (17.99)	Chirac (19.96)	Balladur (18.58)	Chirac (19.8)	Sarkozy (31.18)
Extrême droite	5.2	pas de candidat	0.74	pas de candidat	14.38	15	19.2	10.44
	Tixier- Vignancourt		Le Pen (0.74)		Le Pen (14.38)	Le Pen (15)	Le Pen (16.86)	Le Pen (10.44)

■ Winner on the second round.

■ Runner up on the second round.



round. On the face of it there are two cases where the candidate supported by the median voter did not make it into the second round, namely 1965 and 2007. But the 1965 case is basically a knife-edge case, in that the combined right had 49.8% of the vote, so that de Gaulle was effectively the choice of the median voter. Thus, we do not count de Gaulle's 1965 victory as a violation of the power of the French median voter since it seems obvious that de Gaulle would have beaten *any* other candidate in a hypothetical second round in head-on-head competition because any candidate to his *immediate* left would have lost some support from extreme left (or even left) voters, and any candidate to his right would have been crushed.

This conclusion is buttressed by a look at the actual results of the 1969 contest. Here, based on first round votes, Poher, on the center right, appears to be the median winner, yet he lost the second round to a candidate further to his right, Pompidou. But Poher lost due to abstentions on the extreme left.⁷ Thus, it does not seem to us plausible to count 1969 as a violation of the power of the median voter either, once we distinguish the median voter in the second round electorate from the median voter in the first round electorate by recognizing the right of voters to abstain (largely though alienation) on the second round.⁸

Hence, given how we classify the elections of 1965 and 1969, we find a success rate of 7 of 8 for candidates supported by the median voter. In other words, the *only* clear failure of the French double-round presidential system to select the majority winner occurs in 2007, where Bayrou was the Condorcet winner, and probably would have won in the second round against either Royale (the Social Party candidate) or Sarkozy (the Gaullist), but failed to get enough votes on the first round to make it into the decisive round of the election.

Selecting a candidate preferred by the median voter in each *tendance*

Outcomes in the double-ballot system are simultaneously affected by the location of the overall median voter and by the nature of the within-bloc distribution of voter support — in particular, by which bloc's modal party is closer to the overall median voter. When as is typical, the two candidates in the second round are one from each *tendance*, the winner of the decisive election will be the leader of the camp whose own median voter is closest to the overall median voter.⁹ However, the party closest to the median voter in the party's own bloc may not be the party at the largest mode within that bloc.

Because of this fact, another natural question to ask is 'How often does the median party within each of the two *tendances* have its candidate in the final round?' Here we find the right bloc gets the rightist median party's candidate into the second round six of eight times, with 1981 and 1988 the only exceptions;¹⁰ while the left bloc gets its median party's candidate into the



second round each time, except for 1969 where the Communist party failed to make it to the second round.

Discussion

How can we explain the success of Condorcet winners in French presidential elections? As we suggested earlier, the two key facts are the existence of two blocs that are relatively equally balanced, and the incentives for within-bloc and between-bloc competition on the two rounds. In general, the substantial first round voter support for both the left (usually Socialist) party and the right (usually Gaullist) party, with only limited support in the center of the distribution, made it likely that a candidate of one of these two parties would be chosen who would be a majority winner despite party proliferation in the first round. And, as we have seen, these two parties were, by and large, the parties of the median voters in their own *tendance*.

Notes

- 1 This paper is an extension of an earlier conference paper by the first two authors.
- 2 French presidential elections involve two rounds. In the first round, candidates compete to be the top two vote gatherers — the only ones who advance to the next round. One week later, in the second round, a choice is made between the two options delineated at the first round. After the election of the president, the election of the members of parliament occurs relatively quickly — based on a similar two-round process in single-seat constituencies.
- 3 However, we would emphasize that what we are here labeling as the center, is in fact, the center right; the center left merged with the Socialist Party between 1969 and 1974, during Pompidou's term as president, and no real center left ever subsequently reemerged. Thus, when we view French politics in terms of only two blocs (*tendances*) we treat the center as a component of the right.
- 4 This picture, while clearly a simplification, for example, avoiding the creation of a separate (anti-) immigration dimension on which Le Pen might be located, nonetheless is so much in accord with the way French journalists and political scientists have analyzed the past four decades of French politics that we feel quite comfortable in making use of it.
- 5 There is a considerable literature estimating the *Condorcet efficiency* of various electoral rules, such as plurality, the Borda rule, or approval voting, that is, estimating the likelihood that a majority winner will be chosen by a given electoral rule if such a winner exists in the data set and we have some specified number of competing candidates. Much of this literature assumes, rather unrealistically, that the underlying distribution of voter preferences is some symmetric distribution such as a uniform distribution or a multivariate normal distribution (see, e.g., Fishburn and Gehrlein, 1976; Merrill III, 1984). For the methods that do not guarantee the choice of a Condorcet winner, it can be shown that the likelihood of obtaining the majority winner as the outcome (when one exists) is highly contingent on the assumptions we make about the structure of voter preference distributions. For example, Grofman and Feld (2004) show that, when voter preferences are single-peaked along a unidimensional continuum, the *Coombs method* always picks a majority winner even though this is not true in general, and also show, under this assumption that, when there are four or fewer candidates, the *alternative vote method* is always more likely to select the majority winner than is simple *plurality*.



- 6 The data on the outcome of the Presidential elections are taken from compilations by CEVIPOF/CNRS, the Centre de recherche politique de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques de Paris.
- 7 On the first round in that election, Alain Poher, the center right candidate had 23.3% of the vote to 21.3% for Jacques Duclos, the candidate of the Communist party; while the candidate of the right, Pompidou had a vote share of 44.5%. The votes on the first round for the extreme left (the Communist Party, with Duclos as its candidate; the PSU with Rocard; the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire with Krivine), when combined with those for the candidate of the left (Deferre, the candidate of the Socialist Party), had at least 31% of votes (32.2% if we also add in the votes for Ducatel, the radical independent). Thus, by voting for Poher, and combining their support with his own, voters on the left and extreme left could have defeated Pompidou at the second round, and gotten a candidate closer to their own preferences. Had that happened, the choice of the median voter on the first round would have been made president. But Poher's platform was far from the median voter of the left *tendance* and, in 1969, the communists urged their voters to abstain rather than to vote for Poher. In the second round of the election of 1969, the abstention on the left was massive, and so Pompidou won easily. Valid turnout dropped in the second round by well over a third, as more than 10 million voters either cast no ballot or cast a 'bulletin de vote' for a candidate who was not eligible.
- 8 The public choice literature distinguishes three types of abstention: *abstention from indifference* (the candidates are perceived of as indistinguishable so there is no compelling reason to vote to choose between them), *abstention from alienation* (no candidate is close enough to one's position to compel paying the costs of participation), and *abstention from satisfaction* (both of the candidates are close enough to one's own position that there seems no compelling reason to pay the costs of electoral participation). See for example Weisberg and Grofman (1981).
- 9 There is, however, the important caveat that we need to take into account the possibility of abstention through alienation on the second round (see earlier discussion).
- 10 Balladur in 1995 could also be thought to be an exception, but only if we (wrongly in our view) view him as to the left of Chirac in that election.

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