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INTRODUCTION

Women in French Politics: Still *le deuxième sexe*?

Rainbow Murray

Women's presence in French politics has gained growing attention over the past two decades. The launch of the 'parity' movement in 1992 pushed women's political under-representation onto the public and political agenda. A sustained campaign gathered momentum throughout the 1990s, culminating in the 1999 constitutional revision and 2000 legislation in favour of gender parity. Far from resolving the issue, parity has exposed the entrenched obstacles which women face in various aspects of French politics. As the law has failed to eradicate gender inequalities in French politics, research on this topic has multiplied. Early works in the field (Mossuz-Lavau 1998; Sineau 1988) have been followed by studies explaining the origins and causes of the 'parity law' (Bereni 2007; Lépinard 2007; Opello 2006; Scott 2005); its implementation (Achin *et al.* 2007; Bird 2004; Murray 2010; Sineau 2002; Troupel 2006); and its wider consequences (Ramsay 2008; Sénac-Slawinski 2007). France has drawn attention from scholars within and beyond its borders, incorporating a range of disciplines, from scholars interested in comparing gender quotas across countries, to economists applying rational theories to explain the parity law (Krook 2009; Pemstein & Bernard 2005).

The interest in women in French politics grew even further in 2006, when Ségolène Royal emerged as the Socialist candidate for the 2007 presidential elections. As the first woman candidate with a credible chance of being elected president, she garnered huge amounts of attention, and the role of gender in presidential elections was discussed as never before. When Royal's lead over Nicolas Sarkozy collapsed, a new body of research emerged to scrutinise and analyse the role of gender in her campaign (Sineau 2010).

In 2010—more than 60 years after Simone de Beauvoir's infamous book—women are still *le deuxième sexe* in French politics. Women's growing presence in local politics has not resolved sharp gender segregation. Where the parity law has applied, it has been quite

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successful. Yet the most powerful positions within local politics—executive positions on local councils, especially mayors, and membership of departmental and regional councils—have been very resistant to feminisation. Women have made gains in the offices less coveted by men, such as municipal councils and the European Parliament, while parity has had more limited success in elections to the National Assembly and Senate. Various techniques have been deployed by parties and incumbents to minimise the impact of parity on the male colonisation of parliament. These include the placement of women in unwinnable seats; the deliberate sacrifice of millions of euros in state subsidies by parties who choose not to select enough women candidates in legislative elections; and the proliferation of lists in senatorial elections in order to avoid placing male incumbents in unwinnable positions on party lists. The 50% rise of women deputies in the National Assembly following the 2007 elections is a positive development, yet with 18.9% women in parliament, France is still a long way from fulfilling its promise of parity. Women's growing presence in the French government, and the increasing presence of women in the most prestigious ministries, also conceal some enduring gender imbalances (Murray 2009; Sineau 2008). There has only ever been one female prime minister in France (the ill-fated Edith Cresson), and France has never had a woman president.

The story is not all negative, however. At every election since the introduction of the parity law, the proportion of women has risen. While Royal's presidential bid was not successful, it set an important precedent, demonstrating that a woman was capable of qualifying to the second round of a presidential contest. The idea of women in leadership positions has become increasingly normalised, and it is no longer remarkable to see a woman in a position of power such as the Minister of the Interior, Justice or Finance. In 2008, Martine Aubry became the leader of the Socialist party. Some of the cultural barriers to women's representation in politics are also disappearing. Meanwhile, the parity law has been strengthened on several occasions since its inception ten years ago, and its various loopholes are slowly being closed. While women are not yet close to achieving political equality, their trajectory is upwards and they are gaining momentum in many aspects of political life.

This special issue brings together a range of papers that illustrate the breadth and complementarity of research being conducted on women in French politics. The papers traverse political and cultural barriers, and look at gender from the earliest foundations of a political career through to elections to the highest office in the land. Sophie Rétif looks at the political activism of men and women. Women are more likely to join campaigning groups and voluntary organisations, while men are more likely to get involved in political parties and trade unions. Rétif argues that women underestimate their abilities, and this is both cause and consequence of gendered roles within political organisations. Men are more likely to hold leadership positions and are more confident in putting themselves forward. The gender differences in these formative stages of a political career are very insightful in illustrating some of the causes of gender gaps further along the political pipeline.

Réjane Sénac-Slawinski explores the shifting attitudes towards equality, arguing that the emphasis has begun to move from gender parity towards broader diversity.

Competing claims for inclusion may threaten to undermine efforts to increase women's presence in politics. Claims for women's representation have also become bound up with claims about women's 'difference', resulting in women's acceptance into politics only on the condition of their demonstrable added value, rather than for simple reasons of equality and justice.

Rainbow Murray builds on Rétif's work on political careers, moving upwards to the level of electoral politics. She argues that men and women have different political trajectories, and these gendered pathways have consequences at both the local and national levels. Women tend to enter parliament later than men, with fewer political resources at the local level. Their careers tend to be shorter, and the gendered division of labour is perpetuated in the National Assembly through the segregation of parliamentary committees. As a result, it is harder for women to progress in their political careers and to reach the political summit.

The most coveted office of all—the presidency—is the focus of the remaining three papers, which explore presidential elections from very different angles. Maggie Allison and Sheila Perry look at the role of gender in participatory debates, which were a big feature of the 2007 presidential elections. They illustrate how women members of the audience were given reduced airtime and voice, particularly on the higher-status channels and when questioning the front-running candidates. The secondary role allocated to women in public debates is indicative of the way in which politics is still perceived as a man's game, and access to political environments is still controlled by male-dominated elites.

Fabienne Baider also looks at the role of the media in the presidential elections, this time focusing on the language used to describe different presidential candidates. She argues that political parity has been partially extended to linguistic parity, yet the language used in presidential elections remains subtly gendered. Royal was more likely than her male counterparts to be called by her first name, while Sarkozy and Bayrou were more often described using verbs and adjectives associated with agency and power. Language both reflects and influences attitudes towards political candidates, and the gendered language of the 2007 election undermined Royal and subtly reinforced gendered stereotypes about women politicians.

The final paper, by Mariette Sineau, examines whether there was a gender gap in voting choices in the 2007 presidential elections. The presence of several female candidates, including one in the second round, gave voters the opportunity to vote along gender lines. Although both men and women favoured Sarkozy, Sineau's research uncovers some interesting underlying trends. Sineau finds that Royal won over certain sectors of the electorate, including young women. However, Sarkozy benefited from the presence of a gender-generation gap, with older women being far more conservative. The numerical dominance of older women helped seal the election for Sarkozy. In the longer term, women candidates may benefit from generational change, even if they are currently disadvantaged by traditional attitudes amongst certain sectors of the electorate.

Together, this collection of papers illustrates the various challenges facing women politicians in France. Political careers are gendered from early activism through to

presidential politics, and at every stage in between. Women are treated differently by the media, with sexist assumptions about women's passive and subordinate role. These attitudes are also present in certain portions of the electorate. Public debate is moving away from a focus on women's representation to a broader debate on diversity in politics, even though gender parity is still a long way from being achieved. As the fight for equality continues, the burgeoning literature in this field enables us to explain why women are still *le deuxième sexe*, and to identify the more subtle ways in which women's inequality is perpetuated. Until all the underlying roots of gender imbalances in politics are revealed and addressed, parity will only be able to address the symptoms of women's exclusion rather than the cause.

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