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THE POWER OF SEX AND INCUMBENCY

A Longitudinal Study of Electoral Performance in France

Rainbow Murray

ABSTRACT

In France's 2002 legislative elections, parties spectacularly failed to respect the 'parity' requirement of an equal number of male and female candidates. Women remained a minority, especially in safe seats, where heavy priority was given to the (usually male) incumbents. Parties defended this practice, claiming that it was better to field incumbents than newcomers, and that fielding a woman might cost them the seat. Although these claims were strongly refuted by feminist organizations, they have been difficult to (dis)prove, as women are often placed in the toughest seats and therefore tend to perform badly in the polls. This article helps resolve the argument with a longitudinal study of electoral performance. By comparing candidates within the same seat over several elections, and controlling for swing, the study separates candidate and seat effects to allow an objective evaluation. The results suggest that it is parties, not the electorate, that are discriminating against women.

KEY WORDS ■ candidate selection ■ elections ■ France ■ gender ■ longitudinal analysis

Introduction

Performing well in elections is a central goal of any mainstream political party (Downs, 1957: 11; Ware, 1996: 9). In the case of French parties, on which this article focuses, electoral success determines their financial resources, their relative strength within potential coalitions and hence their ability to influence policy agendas and outcomes. Even when parties do not win, every extra vote increases their financial and political resources. As a result, it is unsurprising that parties will seek to select the electoral candidates that will maximize the party's success at the polls (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988: 7). This is the case particularly in single-member constituency electoral systems, such as the one used in France's legislative elections. The

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candidate becomes the public face of the party within the constituency contested, and the fortunes of the individual and the party become inseparably linked.

However, selecting the most electable candidate is less straightforward an objective than it might at first appear. There are two main barriers to achieving this objective. The first is that it is difficult to measure whether or not one candidate might be more electable than another, and parties therefore tend to rely on familiar faces and traditional characteristics when selecting their candidates (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). One outcome of this is that political elites in France, as elsewhere, tend to be very homogeneous, with middle-class, middle-aged white men being the dominant figures in French politics (Norris, 1997: 6). The second is that candidate selection is not a straightforward process of choosing the best candidate, but rather is a delicate balancing act between competing factions, local and national preferences, incumbents and pretenders and electoral coalitions.

In recent elections in France, an additional requirement for candidate selection has been added to this already complicated mix, namely the 'parity' law. This law, which requires that parties field an equal number of male and female candidates in all elections, was introduced in 2000 in an attempt to address the chronic under-representation of women in French politics. At the time, France was second only to Greece in having the lowest number of women in its parliament of any EU member state. France thus became the first country in the world to introduce a compulsory parity quota. Given the fact that most of France's political elite is male (when the parity law was introduced, women still comprised barely 10 percent of deputies in the National Assembly), the 'parity' requirement potentially has large implications for French candidate selection. In particular, effective implementation of parity would require a renewal and feminization of political elites. This would affect not only the practice but also the norms of candidate selection within French parties. France therefore provides an interesting case study of the implementation of compulsory quotas by political parties.

However, implementation of the 'parity' law has thus far met with very mixed success (Achin and Paoletti, 2002; Baudino, 2003; Bird, 2003; Krook, 2005; Troupel, 2002). Moderately successful application of the law at local level has been offset by the very prominent failure of the law to have a significant impact when applied to the legislative elections of 2002. The number of female candidates fielded fell well below the 50 percent mark, with the 4 largest parties fielding an average of 31.4 percent women candidates.¹ This shortfall was compounded by the fact that a lower proportion of women than men candidates were elected. As a consequence, the number of female deputies increased from 10.9 percent to just 12.3 percent.

Numerous explanations have been proffered for this poor result, including the specific circumstances of the election and the malleability of the law. In addition to carrying a relatively lenient financial penalty for non-implementation,² the law refers only to the number of women candidates,

and not to the number of women elected, and hence does not oblige parties to field women in winnable seats. This resulted in parties minimizing any disruption to their selection preferences by placing women disproportionately in unwinnable seats, with priority in safe seats going to the (usually male) incumbents (Murray, 2004; Zimmerman, 2003a). Even where the incumbent was not standing again, the principle of parity was ignored and women were more often than not passed over in favour of men.

Parties have been largely unapologetic for their practice of favouring incumbents at the expense of women. The PS explained that it was trying to increase the numbers of women in constituencies without incumbents, and to replace incumbents who stood down with women (although the latter was not properly observed in practice).³ However, the right of incumbents to stand again if they so chose was protected (*Le Monde*, 13 November 2001). Meanwhile, the UDF suggested that a proportional representation system would be required to get round the problem of incumbency (Zimmerman, 2003b).⁴ In all cases, the question of incumbency was presented as an insurmountable problem. There was an underlying assumption that it was always better to keep an incumbent than to replace him or her (usually him) with a new candidate.⁵

The UMP was a little more vocal in explaining why it gave priority to men over women. A spokesperson for the party, Pierre Bédier, told *L'Express* that 'a man who wins is less costly than a woman who loses' (*L'Express*, 16 August 2002). This sentiment was echoed by M. de Saint Quentin, party financial director and a member of its selection committee, who claimed that 'it is more financially valuable to have male candidates who win than female candidates who lose' (*Le Monde*, 10 May 2002). The message of these statements is clear: a party is better off disregarding parity and fielding a man rather than a woman, despite the financial penalty that this will incur, because the man is more likely to win the election.⁶ Although other parties have been less explicit in explaining why they do not select more women, their reluctance to do so almost speaks for itself. For example, the justification used by both main parties in giving priority to men in 2002 was the fact that they needed to play safe after the surprise progression of the far-right FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen into the second round of the presidential elections two months earlier (*Le Monde*, 13 July 2002). 'Playing safe' can be interpreted as giving priority to incumbents, who are already familiar to the electorate, and/or as avoiding the 'risk' of fielding women.

Do parties have any justification for their belief that men in general, and incumbents in particular, are a better election prospect than women? At a first glance, the answer would be yes. Women are less likely than men to win their elections. This is visibly manifested in the fact that the proportion of female candidates has always exceeded the proportion of women elected. However, this simplistic evidence has been contested by women's groups, and most notably by the *Observatoire de la Parité*.⁷ In a study of the June 2002 legislative elections, they demonstrated that women were fielded in

constituencies that were already known to be difficult on the basis of their party's performance in the April 2002 presidential elections (Zimmerman, 2003a). Research by Murray on the 2002 elections supports this conclusion (Murray, 2004). Meanwhile, studies conducted elsewhere show that nominating women does not usually produce an electoral penalty (Studlar and Welch, 1987), while nominating incumbents leads to only a small electoral boost that is unlikely to make a difference except in the most marginal of constituencies (Norris et al., 1992). To date, however, there has not been a systematic study of electoral performance of candidates in France over more than one election. As a consequence, it is very difficult to prove (or, indeed, disprove) conclusively whether parties are right to be wary of women candidates, or whether women's poor electoral performance is due solely to the seats in which they are placed. This article seeks to address this problem by conducting a longitudinal study of candidate performance in France.

Separating Seat Effects from Candidate Effects

The key difficulty in measuring candidate success is isolating the impact of the individual candidate from the other factors affecting the election result. One obvious influence on a constituency's electoral outcome is the political environment on a wider scale. One way of controlling for this is to measure the overall left–right swing across the country and to compare the swing within a constituency against the national average. However, this is of limited benefit because France has strong regional differences of political affiliation. It is therefore far more accurate to compare the swing within a constituency to the regional, rather than national, average.

However, even this does not tell the full story. Each constituency is also affected by its own history. The safety of the seat – that is to say, the size of the majority with which it is held – is a very important factor, and can vary considerably even within constituencies in the same region. Thus, it is necessary not only to make comparisons across space, but also across time. By comparing a constituency against its own history, after controlling for swing, it is easier to identify the effects that changes in candidates may have from one election to the next.

In this article, I therefore look at election results spanning the last four general elections in France – those of 2002, 1997, 1993 and 1988.⁸ Changes in party fortunes within each constituency over time are cross-referenced with changes in the candidates presented in that constituency to see whether candidate effects have any impact on party performance. The significance of candidate sex and incumbency status is first monitored by determining whether a change in these affects the election result. The performance of incumbents is then compared to other types of candidate. Finally, the safety of seats in which women are fielded is closely examined to see whether this offers an alternative explanation for women's lower rate of electoral success.

Measuring Sex and Incumbency Effects

In order to separate between seat effects and candidate effects, a measure was created to compare a candidate's performance against the result the party⁹ could expect to achieve, based on the party's previous history within that constituency and its performance in the rest of that region in the same election.¹⁰ A note was then made of whether parties achieved a result broadly in line with what they could reasonably expect, or whether their performance fell above or below expectations. This finding was then cross-referenced against any changes in the sex of either election candidate (as the results use a two-party measurement of swing, the study focuses exclusively on second-round left-right stand-offs).¹¹ The results for the 2002 and 1997 elections are reported in Table 1.¹² A similar test was also performed for incumbency status; the results of this test are reported in Table 2.

Table 1 demonstrates whether a change in the sex of an election candidate from one election to the next caused the party to fare any better or worse than it might otherwise have expected. For example, when the left-wing candidate was a man in 1997 and a woman in 2002, with no corresponding change in the sex of the right-wing candidate, the left-wing party fared better than expected in seven cases, and less well than expected (shown as the unexpected success of the right) in three cases. Where both parties fielded a man in 1997 and a woman in 2002, they fared as expected in two cases, with the Left exceeding expectations in a further two cases and the Right

Table 1. Impact of change in candidate sex

<i>Change in candidate sex</i> ¹ ↓	<i>Party performance versus expectations</i>				
	<i>Right much better than expected</i>	<i>Right better than expected</i>	<i>As expected</i>	<i>Left better than expected</i>	<i>Left much better than expected</i>
No change	13	49	89	45	3
	19	47	78	58	22
Left-wing man → woman	2	3	9	7	1
	1	4	14	9	1
Left-wing woman → man	n/a	1	6	2	n/a
	n/a	1	2	2	1
Right-wing man → woman	2	12	21	7	3
	1	1	2	3	n/a
Both candidates man → woman	n/a	2	2	1	n/a
Right-wing woman → man	2	2	3	5	1
	n/a	1	n/a	1	n/a

Plain figures are for 2002; figures in grey are for 1997.

A two-sided Pearson's chi-square found both the 1997 and 2002 results to be insignificant.

¹This indicates the change in the sex of one or both candidates from the previous election to the next election, i.e. from 1993 to 1997 (1997 results) and from 1997 to 2002 (2002 results).

Table 2. Impact of incumbency

Incumbency status of seat ¹ ↓	<i>Party performance versus expectations</i>				
	<i>Right much better than expected</i>	<i>Right better than expected</i>	<i>As expected</i>	<i>Left better than expected</i>	<i>Left much better than expected</i>
No incumbent	5	9	19	13	0
	3	9	13	15	3
Right-wing incumbent	1	11	33	9	3
	13	34	78	50	20
Left-wing incumbent	14	50	81	49	5
	7	11	6	8	1

Plain figures are for 2002; figures in grey are for 1997.

¹The seats with no incumbent indicate a seat in which the incumbent did not stand for re-election or did not qualify for the second round.

A Pearson's chi-square found the 2002 results to be insignificant, and the 1997 results to be significant to $p < 0.05$.

performing better than expected in the remaining case. There are no 1997 results for this scenario, as there were no seats in which this occurred.

No obvious patterns emerge when studying these results, and the seemingly random distribution of the results in this table is confirmed by statistical testing which confirms the results to be insignificant. This does not, however, mean that they are unimportant. Rather, the absence of a relationship between candidate sex and electoral performance disproves the theory that a change in candidate sex will have an impact on the election outcome. In particular, it provides no evidence to support the suggestion by French parties that replacing a male candidate with a female candidate will harm their electoral prospects.

The results given in Table 2 reveal that, although many left-wing incumbents lost their seats in the 2002 right-wing landslide, the electoral performance of incumbents on both sides was not significantly different from that of non-incumbent candidates. The 1997 results, by contrast, suggest that incumbents actually fared less well than other candidates, and tests confirm this result to be significant. This would therefore suggest that, far from providing an electoral boost, incumbents may actually be an electoral liability, especially if they are associated with an unpopular government. Bearing in mind that France had a change of government for every legislative election from 1978 to 2002 inclusive, incumbents often find that the political tide which brought them in will then wash them back out four or five years later.

As a further test of these results, I conducted regressions testing the impact of incumbency status and any changes in candidate sex on electoral performance. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 indicates that changes in candidate sex appear to have no impact on party performance, and incumbency appears to be significant in 1997 but not in 2002. When the regression was run again with an independent variable that only considered whether the candidate was an incumbent or not, and did not take account of party, the result ceased to be significant. This

Table 3. Combined impact of sex and incumbency

	Unstandardized coefficients, beta		t		Sig.	
	2002	1997	2002	1997	2002	1997
(Constant)	0.296	-1.875	0.477	-2.422	0.634	0.016
Incumbency and party	0.216	1.459	0.612	2.130	0.541	0.034*
Sex and party	-1.40	0.270	-0.871	0.595	0.385	0.553

Dependent variable: *deviation from expected result* (see note 9 for details). See note 12 for explanation of independent variables.

$R^2 = 0.004$ (2002); 0.017 (1997). * $p < 0.05$.

suggests that the significant difference may lie between incumbents of the Right and of the Left, rather than between incumbents and non-incumbents, and the effect was not repeated in 2002. These results therefore support the findings of Tables 1 and 2. The very low R^2 for both regressions supports the hypothesis that sex and incumbency are actually rather poor predictors of electoral outcome. However, given the indication that incumbency may have been significant in 1997, it is worth looking at the power of incumbency in greater detail.

Incumbents versus 'Inheritors'

In addition to incumbents, there are several other categories of candidate who stand in French elections. These include 'former incumbents', namely candidates who have held that seat in the past but were not successful in the previous election. Given the French tendency of *alternance* (switching between governments of the Right and Left at each election), there are quite a few people, especially in swing seats, who fit within this category at each election. In addition, there are 'inheritors', defined by Norris and Lovenduski as 'candidates selected for an open seat previously held by their own party, where the previous MP retired' (1995: 24). Moreover, some seats will be contested by the same candidate at each election, even if the candidate is not successful – indeed, four seats have had the same runner-up for each of the last four elections. The combined effect of incumbents, former incumbents seeking to regain their seats, inheritors (many of whom are the 'favoured sons' of the outgoing deputy) and 'serial losers' means that even in difficult seats, opportunities for would-be candidates are hard to come by. In such a self-perpetuating system, therefore, the political renewal that parity would require poses a radical challenge to candidate selection practices.

Why do the same people keep standing over and over again? In some political systems, a politician who had lost a seat might be deemed a poor choice of candidate. Not so France. Given the fickle nature of the electorate, it is par for the course for certain politicians to have a term in office, be

voted out and then seek to regain their seat when the political tide shifts back in their favour. Indeed, many former deputies expect to be reselected automatically as their party's candidate in their constituency, making it even harder for women to find vacancies in winnable seats.¹³

Although there is clear evidence of parties' willingness to recycle their election candidates, there is far less evidence to suggest that the electorate like to see the same names on the ballot paper year after year. As Table 4 demonstrates, inheritors (who, in this article, are further defined as candidates with no previous electoral history in that seat)¹⁴ may perform as well as, or even better than, present or former incumbents.

Over the course of the past three elections, regardless of party swing, the overall success rate of inheritors has been steadily increasing, although the opportunities accorded to them have diminished due to the ever-increasing numbers of incumbents standing for re-election. This is despite the fact that incumbency, in itself, is no guarantee of electoral success, as the figures for 1997 more than amply demonstrate – barely one in two incumbents managed to hold on to their seat. This explains the significance attached to the 1997 test results for incumbency presented earlier in this article. Table 4 demonstrates that, in that year, incumbents fared particularly badly while an unusually high proportion of former incumbents were successful in regaining their seats. This can be explained in part by the sharp electoral swing to the right in 1993. Many right-wing candidates exceeded their expectations and won seats in former left-wing strongholds, giving the right a staggering majority of 401 seats. Unsurprisingly, many of these newly-won seats were easily overturned when the electorate swung back towards the left in 1997, returning many uprooted left-wing politicians to their former seats. Therefore, while the relationship between incumbency and electoral performance was statistically significant in 1997, it was clearly a party effect caused by the rapid surge and decline in support for the right in the early to mid-1990s. If anything, these results only serve to underline that party is stronger than incumbency in dictating a candidate's electoral fortune.

Table 4. Success rates of incumbents and inheritors

	<i>Incumbents</i>		<i>Former incumbents</i>		<i>Inheritors</i>	
	<i>Total standing</i> ¹	<i>Success rate</i> ²	<i>Total standing</i> ¹	<i>Success rate</i> ²	<i>Total standing</i> ¹	<i>Success rate</i> ²
1993	75.0%	65.4%	n/a ³	n/a ³	27.6%	47.2%
1997	80.9%	57.6%	14.9%	82.6%	17.5%	62.3%
2002	84.2%	71.4%	13.5%	59.0%	13.5%	64.8%

¹ i.e. the percentage of seats in which a candidate of this group was standing.

² i.e. the proportion of candidates within this group who were elected.

³ Reliable data were not available for elections prior to 1988; therefore it is not possible to determine whether candidates in 1993 were seeking to regain a seat won before 1988.

One final point of note in the discussion of incumbency is the fact that women, in addition to forming a very small proportion of present and former incumbents, consistently perform less well than their male counterparts, as Table 5 demonstrates. In fact, although the number of women standing in each category has risen with each election, their relative success rate in proportion to men has actually steadily decreased. In 1993, there was only a slight difference between the performance of male and female incumbents and inheritors. By 2002, the gender gap in electoral performance had become marked in all categories.

There are several, linked, explanations for this trend. Given that the above results imply that the electorate do not penalize female candidates, this is an unlikely explanation for their increasingly poor results. It is more probable that women have consistently been placed in difficult seats. As incumbents, they are frequently defending difficult seats that were only won at the last election due to the extent of the political swing in their party's favour, and hence that are held with slim majorities likely to be overturned at the next election as the electorate swing back again.¹⁵ Moreover, although the number of women fielded as inheritors has increased quite dramatically – due in part to the policy of the Socialist Party of replacing retiring incumbents with women in 1997, and in part to the demands of parity in 2002 – it would seem that parties have been rather less generous to women than to men in handing out safe seats.

Although there is some existing research to support the hypothesis that it is the safety of seat rather than the candidate's sex that causes women to perform badly (Murray, 2004; Zimmerman, 2003a), there has not yet been a systematic study definitely proving whether or not women are disproportionately placed in difficult seats. The final section of this article aims to address this problem.

Table 5. Female incumbents and inheritors

	<i>Incumbents</i>		<i>Former incumbents</i>		<i>Inheritors</i>	
	<i>Percent women</i> ¹	<i>Success rate (%)</i> ²	<i>Percent women</i> ¹	<i>Success rate (%)</i> ²	<i>Percent women</i> ¹	<i>Success rate (%)</i> ²
1993	5.3 (23)	65.2 (65.4)	n/a ³	n/a ³	8.2 (13)	46.2 (47.2)
1997	6.2 (29)	48.3 (58.2)	4.7 (4)	75.0 (82.9)	13.9 (14)	50.0 (64.4)
2002	11.3 (54)	58.2 (73.0)	5.1 (4)	50.0 (59.4)	27.6 (29)	51.7 (69.7)

All figures are percentages.

¹ The percentage of total candidates in this category who were female. The figures in parentheses are the actual n that this percentage represents.

² The success rate of female candidates. The figures in parentheses show the success rate for male candidates.

³ Reliable data were not available for elections prior to 1988; therefore, it is not possible to determine whether candidates in 1993 were seeking to regain a seat won before 1988.

Candidate Sex and Safety of Seat

In order to make a fair appraisal of safety of seat, I used the measure of the swing required to overturn the seat at the next election. Using the typical distribution of swing as a barometer (with the average swing per election falling between 4.9 percent and 8.5 percent), I then grouped seats into five categories of safety according to the swing required to overturn the seat (in parentheses): very safe (>15 percent), fairly safe (8–15 percent), ‘could swing’ (5–8 percent), vulnerable (2–5 percent) and marginal (<2 percent). These categories were then compared against the sex and party of candidates for the 1993, 1997 and 2002 elections. The results are reported in Table 6.

Table 6 is interesting for a number of reasons. For each election, the gender distribution is significant for half of the seats, but not for the other half. It is not a coincidence that this significance oscillates to the same rhythm as electoral swing. Parties generally know in advance whether or not they are likely to do well in a general election (especially in France, with its history of *alternance*) and parties will therefore be targeting a set of swing seats in one election and then defending them in the next. Thus, in 1993 and 2002, the Left were defending and the Right were challenging; in 1997 the reverse was true. For the party that is defending, the most desirable seats are the safest ones, as these are the seats least likely to be overturned by a swing to the opposition. Conversely, for the party that is attacking, the best seats are the ones that are marginal, as these are the seats that are most easily won.

Regardless of the party in question, whichever side is defending will put its female candidates on the front line, in the most vulnerable seats, while conserving a disproportionate number of the safest seats for its male candidates. For example, in 1993, men representing the Left had a monopoly over the safest seats, while a much higher proportion of women than men were fielded in marginal constituencies. When the large differences in the number of male and female candidates are taken into consideration, the paucity of women in the safest seats becomes even more stark; for example, although 4 percent of female right-wing candidates defended safe seats in 1997 compared to 2 percent of men, this actually equates to 6 men and only 1 woman in the safest seats, with 78 out of the 84 ‘fairly safe’ right-wing seats that year also being defended by men.

Meanwhile, the side which is attacking will do the reverse – the male candidates are disproportionately placed in the most winnable seats (i.e. those that are the most marginal), while the majority of women are relegated to seats in which they stand little or no chance of election. For example, in 2002, women on the Right were more than four times more likely to contest a seat that was considered safe or fairly safe for the Left than they were to contest a marginal seat with a good chance of victory, whereas the majority of men stood in the constituencies that were easiest to win back from the Left.

Table 6. Sex and safety of seat

	1993				1997				2002			
	Left-wing		Right-wing		Left-wing		Right-wing		Left-wing		Right-wing	
	M ¹	F ²	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
DEFENDER												
Very safe	8 (4)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (2)	1 (0)	5 (2)	0 (0)	4 (2)	1 (1)
Fairly safe	52 (25)	4 (2)	7 (7)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	78 (29)	6 (2)	62 (23)	13 (5)	23 (12)	2 (1)
Could swing	35 (16)	6 (3)	10 (10)	3 (3)	7 (13)	1 (2)	51 (19)	4 (2)	39 (14)	11 (4)	37 (19)	2 (1)
Vulnerable	63 (30)	2 (1)	29 (30)	3 (3)	19 (36)	3 (6)	71 (27)	6 (2)	68 (25)	11 (4)	64 (33)	7 (4)
Marginal	37 (17)	8 (4)	40 (42)	2 (2)	21 (40)	2 (4)	35 (13)	7 (3)	43 (16)	20 (7)	50 (26)	5 (3)
CHALLENGER												
Very safe	1 (1)	0 (0)	7 (3)	1 (0)	4 (2)	3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	4 (2)	4 (1)	1 (0)
Fairly safe	7 (7)	1 (1)	51 (25)	5 (2)	63 (24)	21 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	11 (6)	14 (7)	50 (18)	25 (9)
Could swing	11 (11)	2 (2)	31 (15)	4 (2)	44 (17)	11 (4)	6 (11)	2 (4)	19 (10)	20 (10)	38 (14)	12 (4)
Vulnerable	28 (29)	4 (4)	63 (30)	1 (0)	67 (25)	10 (4)	21 (40)	1 (2)	36 (18)	35 (18)	61 (22)	18 (7)
Marginal	36 (38)	6 (6)	42 (20)	3 (1)	39 (15)	3 (1)	20 (38)	3 (6)	36 (18)	19 (10)	57 (21)	6 (2)

¹ Male candidate. ² Female candidate.

Figures represent the actual *n*. Figures in parentheses are percentages within the columns for defenders and for challengers rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Pearson chi-square results for this table are as follows:

1993 Areas shaded in grey: *p* = 0.042. Unshaded areas: no significance.

1997 Areas shaded in grey: *p* = 0.035. Unshaded areas: no significance.

2002 Areas shaded in grey: *p* = 0.042. Unshaded areas: no significance.

Conversely, parties are less markedly divided on gender in the seats which are not likely to swing, and the results for these seats (which are unshaded in the table) are not significant. It would seem that parties are more prepared to place women in target seats that are theoretically winnable (i.e. requiring only a fairly small swing in their party's favour) if they know that a swing against their party is far more likely.

The significance of these findings is confirmed by statistical tests, and also by the fact that the trend was as strong in 2002 as in 1993, despite the increasing numbers of female candidates. It is also of note that the trend applies equally to parties of the Left and of the Right. This contradicts findings by Caul, for example, that left-wing parties are more likely than right-wing parties to support female candidates (Caul, 1999; Caul Kittilson, 2006), even though the pronouncements of parties on parity would suggest that parties of the Left were more sympathetic to female candidates than parties of the Right. These findings indicate that the differences between left-wing and right-wing parties are largely rhetoric rather than substance. Therefore, although parties are starting to make token gestures towards increasing women's representation, these results prove that women are consistently placed in the most difficult seats. It is easier to make room for more women in seats with little or no chance of election. This explains why the increase in the number of female candidates has not translated into a corresponding increase in the number of women elected.

Conclusions

This article provides considerable evidence supporting the hypothesis that it is parties, and not the electorate, that discriminate against female candidates and prevent them from being elected in equal proportion to their candidate numbers. After controlling for both geographical and temporal electoral trends, there was no evidence that changes in candidate sex had any impact on electoral performance. Moreover, there was only scant evidence to suggest that incumbency had an impact on election results. The only election which appeared to be affected by incumbency was that of 1997, in which incumbency actually appeared to have a negative effect. Further tests demonstrated that this was in fact a party effect, linked to the large swing towards and then against the Right in the 1990s.

The beneficial effects of incumbency were further brought into question when it was revealed that inheritors are performing increasingly well at the polls – indeed, in 1997, they out-performed incumbents. It is not yet clear whether this was an exceptional result, or whether the trend will continue for incumbents to perform better under right-wing victories, and for former incumbents and inheritors to perform better under left-wing victories. If 1997 was an exceptional result then incumbents do appear to enjoy a certain, slight advantage over newcomers. If the trend continues, however, then this

reinforces the hypothesis that the effect is primarily one of party rather than incumbency.

The question regarding the electoral weight of incumbency therefore remains partly unresolved. The question regarding women's electoral performance, on the other hand, is far more conclusive. In addition to refuting the suggestion that women perform less well at the polls, this article provides strong evidence to suggest that women are indeed placed in the most difficult seats, and, further, that this is an integral part of party electoral strategy. This leads to the conclusion that parties may not be objective in seeking the candidates that are the most electable, and/or that they may be selecting candidates for motives other than anticipated performance at the polls. Either way, I have demonstrated that parties' claims regarding the electoral cost of political renewal and feminization are unfounded and are entirely inadequate as a justification for selecting so few women. The law needs to be reformed to prevent the strategic discrimination against women evidenced by this article. First, the law needs to take into account not only the number of women selected but also the number of women elected, thus forcing parties to place a greater proportion of women in winnable seats. Second, the penalties for non-implementation need to be strengthened in order to force parties to overcome their reluctance to field women. Until the financial penalty for non-implementation of parity exceeds the perceived financial loss of fielding women candidates, the 'parity' law will not be sufficient to break the cycle of discrimination against women candidates by French parties.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented to the annual conference of the Political Studies Association, Leeds 2005, where it was awarded the PSA Vincent Wright Award for the best article with a French politics component. I thank all those who commented on earlier drafts, especially Amy Mazur, Joni Lovenduski, Rosie Campbell, Jerry Johnson, Jennifer Van Heerde and John Gaffney, as well as the anonymous referees and editor of this journal for useful comments. I also thank ESRC for funding this project. Any errors that remain are my own.

- 1 The winning party and main party of the Right, the UMP, fielded 19.93 percent women. The main party of the Left, the PS, fielded 36.13 percent women candidates. Their coalition partners performed similarly (19.68 percent for the right-wing UDF; 43.95 percent for the left-wing PCF). Most of the parties expected to achieve or come close to parity did not win seats (Ministère de l'Intérieur; taken from www.observatoire-parite.gouv.fr).
- 2 For local, European and some senatorial elections, which use a form of proportional representation, a party list will not be accepted unless it observes the requirements of parity. By contrast, legislative elections (which are conducted under a majoritarian electoral system) are subject to a financial rather than political penalty, enabling richer parties to sidestep the law. The financial penalty consists of a reduction in a party's state subsidy proportional to their disregard

- for the law. However, the law only affects the proportion of state subsidy linked to the number of votes received, and does not affect the second portion of subsidy which is linked to the number of seats won; see note 6, below.
- 3 Several male candidates who were retiring ensured that their preferred (male) successor took their place, despite the party policy to give vacant seats to women (*Le Monde*, 15 December 2001)
 - 4 A shift to a system of proportional representation in legislative elections is unlikely in France after it was once used for partisan purposes by the PS in 1986 and immediately revoked by the victorious RPR as soon as they came into power. Indeed, it was strongly reiterated at the time of parity's introduction that it would not be used as an excuse to reintroduce proportional representation, which was associated with the weak governments of the Fourth Republic.
 - 5 There may also have been the fear that an incumbent who was not put forward again as the party's candidate might stand anyway under a different party ticket (as was the case in the senatorial elections the previous year).
 - 6 A proportion of party funding is linked to the number of seats won; in financial terms, the money gained from winning a seat is greater than the money lost by failing to implement parity in that seat
 - 7 The Observatoire de la Parité was formed in 1995 to monitor the need for and subsequent implementation of parity in France. Originally a toothless body formed by Chirac as a result of an electoral promise designed to woo female voters, the Observatoire has gradually accumulated some resources but still remains a source of research rather than a powerful actor in the policy-making process.
 - 8 It is not possible to make meaningful comparisons beyond 1988 because a proportional electoral system was temporarily deployed for the 1986 general election, and elections prior to that date operated under different boundaries and with fewer seats.
 - 9 France operates under a multiparty system; however, all electable parties, with the exception of the National Front (FN), tend to fall into one of two broad electoral coalitions representing the Left and the Right. To avoid unnecessary complexity I have divided parties for the purpose of this article into the three categories of Left, Right and FN. This article focuses on elections that were a left-right stand-off.
 - 10 This measure was achieved by measuring the swing from the first election to the second election, and then deducting the swing in each seat from the average swing for that region to produce a 'deviation' score. This deviation score was then deducted from the 'deviation' score of the preceding election to produce a dependent variable that accounted for party performance across space (the region) and time (the previous election).
 - 11 French legislative elections are held over two rounds, unless one candidate achieves an absolute majority in the first round of voting. First round results are not comparable to second round results due to the presence of additional parties. Elections contested in the second round are usually a left-right stand-off, although in a minority of constituencies the FN qualifies to the second round with one or two other parties. The presence of a third party invalidates the two-party measurement of swing, therefore these cases were excluded from tests that used swing as a variable. This does not have a very detrimental effect on the total *N*. For example, in the 2002 election, 60 seats were decided after one round and a

- further 39 seats were not traditional left–right stand-offs in the second round, out of a total of 577 seats.
- 12 In order to compile the data, it is necessary to use data from two previous elections; for this reason, results can only be generated for 1997 and 2002.
 - 13 For example, in 2001 the RPR party (prior to forming the UMP) had to incorporate 70–80 former incumbents seeking re-election into their calculations on how to implement parity (*Le Monde*, 25 November 2001). For the 2007 elections, it is parties of the Left who face this dilemma (interview with Catherine Genisson, Women’s Secretary of the PS, 06 July 2005).
 - 14 To the extent of the author’s knowledge. The data are based on the second round candidates at the time of the legislative elections in 1988 onwards. Some omissions may be possible owing to candidates who stood in that seat prior to this date, who stood in by-elections, and/or who previously stood in that seat but did not qualify for the second round. These candidates may also have served as a *suppléant* (reserve candidate) to a sitting deputy.
 - 15 The success rates for former incumbents are fairly arbitrary as the number of women concerned was so low – six in 1993 and four in both 1997 and 2001.

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