Small Political Parties in the French Political System

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**SMALL POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE FRENCH POLITICAL SYSTEM**

*Julie DeMoyer*

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**Introduction**

Small political parties are becoming increasingly important in French politics. These parties have been growing in number and attracting more voters to their respective causes. Many of the parties have not limited their attention to small local elections, but rather have fielded candidates for political offices as high as the presidency. As these parties gain in strength, they are slowly placing themselves in positions where they, collectively and as individual parties, have the potential to influence the public by spreading their views on topics as minor as local issues and as major as European integration. What are some of these political groups? Will these groups ever become mainstream political parties in the current political climate of France?

In this article, I describe some basic characteristics of the political system in France today: the organization of the government, the format of elections, and the major and some of the better known minor political parties. I then analyze two of the more prominent small parties, the Front National and the Verts, examining their backgrounds, current platforms, and political success. Finally, I evaluate their chances for success in future elections.

**A Brief Description of the Government**

To better understand the role of the political parties in French society, a brief description of the French government system must be given. On the national level, the legislative branch consists of a two-house legislature, called the Parliament. It is comprised of the National Assembly, a directly elected 577-member body, and the Senate, a 321-member body elected indirectly through municipal councilors. Bills are presented, discussed, and voted upon in both houses before becoming law. If the two houses cannot agree upon a version of a bill, the version passed by the National Assembly becomes law. The passed bills are evaluated by the Constitutional Council to ensure the new laws are in concurrence with the Constitution of France. (“The Legislative...”)

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**Image:** Portrait of Julie DeMoyer
On the national level, the executive branch consists of the president, prime minister, and cabinet. The president is elected for seven years and faces no term limits. Instead of a simultaneously elected vice president, the president appoints the prime minister after a presidential election. The president usually appoints a prime minister from the party with the majority of seats in the parliament. This can lead to a period of "cohabitation," a term signifying a situation where the president and prime minister are from different parties. It is the job of the president to create the major policy platforms of the administration, and it is the job of the prime minister to carry them out through the members of the cabinet. ("The Executive")

The executive branch has a great influence over Parliament. The executive plays a major role in initiating legislation and has the power to control the Parliamentary agenda. Consequently, about 90 percent of the laws passed each year are initiated by the executive branch. (Corbett, p. 223) If the Parliament opposes a bill put forth by the executive branch, the executive may make the bill an "issue of confidence." By doing this, the bill is considered law unless a parliamentary majority votes for a motion of censure. The government also may bypass the Parliament altogether by issuing a decree. This power granted to the president makes the presidential election the most important election in France.

The local government has three tiers: regions, departments, and communes. The elected officials in the 22 regions and 95 departments are responsible for large-scale planning of the economy and welfare. In the approximately 36,000 communes, a mayor and municipal council manage the towns or villages that make up the commune. (Corbett, pp. 284-93)

Elections

Elections are held using either proportional representation or two-ballot majority voting. Proportional representation is used in European parliamentary, regional, and some small municipal elections. One election is held and the number of representatives elected from each party is dependent on the number of votes the party as a whole received. Presidential, parliamentary, departmental and larger municipal elections follow the two-ballot system. To be declared the winner in the first round, the candidate or list of candidates must obtain at least 50 percent of the vote. If no candidate or list achieves this, there is a second ballot containing only those candidates who obtained at least 12.5 percent of the vote in the first round. Usually only two candidates advance to the second ballot, but three or even four candidates occasionally advance if the vote is sufficiently close. ("La Vie...")

Candidates run either individually or on a list, depending on the type of election. In the European Parliamentary elections voters must vote for a party list and not for individual candidates. For presidential and National Assembly elections, candidates run individually. Additionally, presidential candidates must receive signatures from 500 elected officials before they may officially run for president. ("La Vie...")

In all elections, voters are not constrained to voting for their own political party. Unlike a primary election in the United States, the names of candidates from all of the parties appear on the first ballot, and the voters may choose freely among them. This encourages a multiparty system in France, since it allows all candidates to be equally represented on the first ballot. Additionally, participating in the first ballot is a way for smaller parties to draw attention to themselves and to publicize their platforms.

Major and Minor Political Parties

The government is dominated by three political parties: le Rassemblement pour la Republique (Rally for the Republic, RPR), L'Union pour la Democratie Fran~aise (Union for French Democracy, UDF), and le Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, PS). Currently, the national government is controlled by the RPR. The party holds the majority of the seats in both the National Assembly and Senate; and its founder, Jacques Chirac, is the President of France. To the right of the political spectrum, the RPR was founded on principles established by Charles de Gaulle. Some of these themes include a strong sense of nationalism and the belief in a strong president. The RPR came into power in the Parliament in 1993 when the country took a conservative
turn. That trend was reconfirmed in 1995 when Chirac won the presidency.

Towards the center-right of the political spectrum lies the UDF, a loose coalition of several political parties. The two main parties contributing to the UDF are the Parti Républicain (Republican Party, PR) and the Force Democrat (FD), a Christian Democrat group. The UDF is loosely based on the belief of economic liberalism, i.e. opposition to any state intervention or control of the economy. A notable feature of the UDF is its structure or lack thereof. Each constituent party has its own organization and leadership. The only joint ventures between the parties involve campaign organizing and making arrangements for choosing candidates for office. In many instances, the two main parties have failed to agree on a common objective, leading to each party independently supporting different candidates.

The third major party is the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, PS). While located to the left of the political spectrum, the current policies of the party tend to be more moderate and mainstream than traditional socialist views. Until the 1990s, the left had been the dominant political force in France, with Francois Mitterand as President and a large number of representatives in the National Assembly and Senate. In 1993 the PS and their affiliated political allies lost much of their representation, keeping only 67 out of 282 previously elected deputies and keeping only 67 senators. (Corbett, p. 226)

A fourth traditionally strong party in France is the Parti Communiste Français (Communist Party, PCF). With its beginnings in 1922, the Communists were once a strong party throughout the Fourth Republic and remained powerful in the Fifth Republic until the 1980s. At this time, the party began to decline in numbers, a trend that was accelerated by the fall of the Soviet Union. Still, due to geographically concentrated voters and an occasional pact with the PS, the PCF has retained some seats in Parliament. (Guyomarch, p. 107)

Although the political system is dominated by the three mainstream parties (RPR, UDF, and PS) and still influenced by the Communists, many small nonmainstream parties have entered the political scene. In the 1993 elections, only 34.4 percent of the candidates run-

ning belonged to the four traditional parties. The rest of the candidates were from small political parties. (Appleton, p. 63) Some of these parties have grown into moderately large political forces, like the Front National (National Front, FN) while others, like the Verts (or the Greens), have found their political bases crumbling. Some of the parties are one-issue parties, like the Chasse, Peche, Nature, Tradition (Hunt, Fish, Nature, Tradition) party, which exists in order to protest the loss of traditional privileges of hunters and fishermen in France to the regulations of the European Commission. (Appleton, p. 64) Other parties have formed for the purely financial reason of obtaining public financing allocated to political parties after elections. The question arises, Do any of these smaller political parties have the potential of becoming large, mainstream political forces? To address this question, two of the larger, more publicized of the smaller parties, the Front National and the Verts, will be analyzed to determine if they could possibly achieve mainstream status.

The Front National

Le Pen and Party Ideology

The Front National (National Front, FN) has become an important secondary party on the political scene, gaining small but significant popular support in recent years. Formed by Jean Marie Le Pen in 1972, the Front is characterized as an extreme right wing party. In the 1995 municipal elections, FN candidates were elected as mayors in the towns of Toulon, Marignane, and Orange. Previously, only one Front member had ever been elected mayor of a large town. Winning three substantially populated towns in one election was a major milestone for the party. Also in 1995, Le Pen's moderate success as a presidential candidate reflected the growing influence of the FN. In these elections, Le Pen received 4.5 million votes while the Communist candidate, Robert Hue, only received 2.6 million votes. Le Pen had the potential to receive even more votes, but the other far right candidate, Philippe deVilliers, chipped away at his voting base by obtaining 1.4 million of the far right votes.
Even with the increasing popularity of the party, the FN still has not achieved mainstream political status. Why is this? Part of the answer can be found in the party's political ideology. The FN is well known for its xenophobic and reactionist politics, aptly summarized by one of the party's slogans, “French First.” (Xenophobic Rhetoric..., p. 4) The traditional focus of the party has been opposing immigration into France. Le Pen illustrated the party's attitude towards immigration by referring to it as “foreign invasion by osmosis.” (Nevel, p. H1). The Front wants to halt all current immigration into France and send those immigrants living in France back to their countries of origin. Doing this would supposedly free up one and a quarter million jobs for unemployed French citizens, helping to reduce France's unemployment rate, which has reached as high as 12 percent in recent years. Such views on immigration have led to the great popularity of the FN among unemployed workers. To further reduce unemployment, the Front also has proposed a policy referred to as the “parental income.” Aimed at women, this program would pay a woman 6,000 francs a month to quit her job to take care of her children. (Marcus, p. 23) Other party issues include forbidding abortion, banning American movies and other American cultural products, and giving parents of large families extra votes in elections. The extra votes would be used as an incentive for couples to have more children to combat the declining French population. (Wolfreys, p. 423)

Public remarks made by Le Pen also may have contributed to the current failure of the FN to become a mainstream party. Ever since the Front's creation, it has been closely identified with Le Pen's dominant persona, and any remarks made by him have been associated directly with the party. For example, Le Pen has publicly stated that it is “a fact” that the races are unequal and has asserted the superiority of the French civilization. (Cayol) He even has welcomed Nazi collaborators to join his party and dismissed Hitler's gas chambers as a “point of detail.” (Nevel, p. H1) Additionally, Le Pen wrote an open letter on Mothers Day 1996, reminding women that it was their patriotic duty to have more children to protect the identity of France. (Simons, p. A8) Comments like these by Le Pen have the potential to alienate many voters.

Actions by some FN supporters have created still other reasons for voters to be wary of the party. In 1995, for example, some FN campaigners distributing campaign propaganda shot and killed a black teenager in Marseilles. In another incident, a group of skinheads left a Front rally and murdered a Moroccan man by throwing him into the Seine River. Such well publicized violent incidents involving supporters of the Front have the potential to scare voters away from the party.

**Other Obstacles to Success**

Beyond the issues involving the political ideology of the party and its supporters, the electoral system itself makes it difficult for smaller parties like the FN to gain representation. In the elections with two-ballot voting, it is difficult for the FN to achieve the necessary majority. It is possible for FN candidates to get the 12.5 percent of the votes needed to advance to the second round. Getting the 50 percent needed to win the second round usually proves to be impossible, especially when running against mainstream candidates. As a result, the FN candidates usually cannot achieve the majority in the second ballot and are defeated.

The party had greater success when universal proportional representation was temporarily instituted for the 1986 parliamentary elections. During these elections, the FN was able to win 32 seats in the National Assembly. When the voting was changed back to the two-ballot majority rules system in the following election, the Front lost all of its seats in the Assembly and has yet to regain a single seat. Recently, Prime Minister Alain Juppe spoke about reverting back to proportional representation. If this were to be done, some predict that the Front would have a good chance of winning up to 35 seats in the Parliament. (Jack, p. 3) However, extreme opposition within the RPR makes it unlikely that this reform will be passed.

The mainstream parties also have made it difficult for the Front to obtain representation in the government. In response to an FN candidate advancing to the second ballot, the mainstream parties have been known to encourage
their voters to vote for a candidate from any other party but the Front. If three or four candidates advance to the second ballot, one of the mainstream parties sometimes will stand down if the party fears that their presence will split the vote of mainstream voters and contribute to the electoral success of an FN candidate. Additionally, the PS, PCF, and the Verts have agreed to unite against the further success of the FN. (Swardson) Such joint initiatives by other parties help prevent the Front from winning elections.

Not only do other political parties campaign against the FN, but some nonpolitical interest groups do so as well. One such group is S.O.S.-Racisme, a nonprofit group dedicated to stopping racism. The Front has many platforms which many people consider racist, such as those relating to immigrants. During the summer of 1996, S.O.S.-Racisme initiated a campaign to educate the public about all of the platforms of the FN. In order to reach a large number of voters, the group created and distributed posters with anti-Front propaganda. In addition, S.O.S.-Racisme published a booklet titled Defendre la Democratie! 50 Reponses au Programme du Front National. After listing the FN political viewpoint on issues ranging from unemployment to the family, S.O.S.-Racisme responded with its opposing view on that issue. Through these measures, S.O.S.-Racisme strived to help voters realize exactly what their vote for the FN represented.

**Impact on Society**

Despite these obstacles, the FN has had an impact on the French government. In fact, on a few occasions, the government has been accused of taking actions that would appeal to FN voters. For example, forty-six measures listed in a parliamentary report which was proposed to fight illegal immigration have been protested by left wing parties and the National Human Rights Commission. Some of the measures include limiting immigrants' access to education and eliminating all but emergency health care benefits. ("French Rights...") In another instance, the government took a direct course of action that could be interpreted as an appeal to FN voters. In this case, three hundred African immigrants had occupied a church in order to avoid deportation. To resolve the situation, the French government sent in riot police instead of negotiating a non-violent conclusion. The government's parliamentary report and its use of riot police against immigrants are both actions that would appeal to the anti-immigrant sentiment predominant in FN voters.

Recently, the government has reacted to Le Pen and the FN by proposing anti-racism legislation, a clear response to the sometimes racist remarks made by Le Pen in his speeches. Under the proposed anti-racism laws, a person could be prosecuted for comments which could be construed as racist, even if no reference was made to a particular religion or race. The power to determine whether or not a statement was racist would be invested solely in judges. If found guilty, a person could receive up to a $60,000 fine and one year in prison. If the comment led to "discrimination, hatred, or violence,” the offender could be jailed up to two years and fined $100,000. ("Cabinet Supports...," p. 12) This proposed law has outraged civil liberties groups, who have called it an infringement on the rights of free speech, and has been temporarily put on hold. Nevertheless, this example illustrates how the government has reacted to the FN.

Recent elections and polls have shown that the Front's party ideology has managed to infiltrate French society. By Le Pen winning over four and a half million votes in the 1995 presidential election and by three FN candidates being elected as mayors, the FN has shown that it is a small but prominent force in politics. It was found in a recent poll that between 30 and 50 percent of the French say that they share some of the Front's viewpoints on various issues. Le Pen has gained additional credibility in the minds of some voters by the famous actress Brigette Bardot declaring in her memoirs that Le Pen is "a charming and intelligent man who, like me, is revolted by certain things. On the terrifying surge of immigration, I share his views completely.” (Swardson) Overall, the influence of the FN is increasing in France, regardless of whether it can be considered a mainstream party.
Les Verts

Background

The second small political party which I will discuss is the ecology party called the Verts (Greens). While the Front National has achieved some success in elections, the Verts have not. But what makes the relative success of these parties so different and do the Verts have a chance of becoming a mainstream party?

The Verts were formed in 1984 when a number of small regional ecology parties banded together under one name. Instead of creating an interlocking bureaucracy or a dominant leader to unite the groups, the Verts remained a loosely affiliated group of independent movements. Only a common spokesperson, Antoine Waechter, joined the groups together. However, not all of the groups have recognized his statements as representing their individual positions. On several occasions, Waechter has been openly contradicted by regional leaders within the party, causing the party to look confused and disorganized. In addition, the regional leaders were not able to agree on enough issues to create a defined party objective. This initial problem between the groups has plagued the party throughout its history. This problem manifested itself as late as 1992 during the Maastricht debate, when the Verts were unable to define a party position due to an even split in opinion among its members.

In an attempt to transcend party politics, the Verts established their slogan as "Neither Right nor Left." However, this slogan served to incapacitate the party politically. Due to their proclaimed political impartiality, the Verts would not form alliances with major parties, since all of the major parties were known as being either to the left or right of the political spectrum. Support from one of the larger parties could have enhanced the Verts' visibility and increased their candidates chances for success in elections.

Competition

The major problem encountered by the Verts is competition from other ecology parties. The most significant rival for voters is the group called Génération Ecologie (GE). Founded in 1990, its founder Brice Lalonde has created a well organized party under his own leadership. Since the Verts were perceived to have leftward leanings, GE was aimed at the more centrist voter. Since its formation, GE has managed to siphon votes away from the Verts.

For the 1993 elections, the Verts varied from their traditional political course by entering into an alliance with the GE. This alliance was called Entente des Ecologistes (Ecology Alliance, EE). In forming the alliance, the two groups agreed on a general political message that included some economic and ecological reforms. More importantly, an agreement was reached which allowed only one candidate from either of the parties to run in each constituency. This was meant to eliminate direct competition between the parties and to combine the ecology vote in order to strengthen the two parties. Uniting in this fashion allowed the alliance to have a common candidate in 547 out of the 551 constituencies. Despite the alliance, the results of the 1993 election were disappointing for both parties. The EE received only 7.7 percent of the national vote with only two candidates advancing to the second round of elections, where both were defeated. (Holliday, p. 66) Due to the poor election results and internal differences, the Verts and GE dissolved their alliance in time for the 1994 Parliamentary elections.

The GE is not the only ecology party in competition with the Verts. There are numerous other ecology parties crowding the French political landscape. Some of these parties have actual ecology platforms, while other parties have ecology-sounding names but no real ecology platform. In the 1993 elections, there were over 1,500 candidates associated with various parties possessing ecology-sounding names. The Verts must contend with all of these parties and must be able to set themselves apart from them in the eyes of the voter.

Oddly, most of the parties with ecologist names are not connected with the ecology movement. For example, the group Nouvelle Ecologiste du Rassemblement Nature et Animaux (New Ecologists, NE) had 551 candidates who were recruited through classified advertisements. Regardless of its party name, NE was a purely opportunistic political entity.
As stated by its founder, Bernard Manovelli, the goal of the party was to qualify for the public funding that political parties can receive if they achieve a certain percentage of the vote. It was estimated that if NE spent 2 million francs on the campaign, they could receive 10 million francs in political funding. Even though these facts were known, the party managed to receive 2.6 percent of the votes cast. (Appleton, p. 62)

Most of the other parties are not as extreme as this example. However, they do significantly lack in ecology platforms, regardless of the connotations of their names.

**Other Obstacles to the Verts' Success**

In the 1993 elections, the Verts most likely lost additional votes to the other ecology parties due to the voting format in France. To vote, voters must insert and seal a voting slip in an envelope which has been provided by the state. The actual voting slips are provided by the individual candidates, although the design of the slip is regulated by the state. The slips include the candidate's name, party, and optional additional information such as profession or party slogan. The design of the slips can be used to confuse voters. For example, the group NE had the word “Ecologistes” typed in large font on their slip with the actual name of the group in very small font. Multiple slips bearing the ecologist name or having ecology connotations could have confused voters into unintentionally voting for parties they did not want. The multiple slips also may have frustrated some voters, causing them not to vote for any ecology group at all. (Holliday, pp. 75-76)

Other problems facing the Verts are protest voting and a lack of connection with the voters. Many voting for the Verts have used their votes merely as a protest vote against another party. In a poll before the 1993 elections, it was found that one half of those who were willing to vote for the Verts were going to do so as either a direct protest against the Socialist party or as a protest against all mainstream parties in general. Most of the others who voted for the Verts were not very strong supporters of the party. The same poll indicated that only one percent of the ecology voters agreed with the party's entire political platform. (Appleton, p. 62)

**Recent Developments**

After the 1993 elections, the Verts entered a new political era with the departure of Waechter and the election of Dominique Voynet as their leader. With the “Neither Left nor Right” slogan gone with Waechter, Voynet has led the Verts to the left of the political spectrum. This shift is fitting for the party. During the second ballot voting in past elections, the majority of the Verts’ voters voted for candidates on the left. (Szarka, “Green Politics...” p. 453)

In addition, the general public traditionally has identified the party as being on the left of the political spectrum.

Despite all its difficulties, the party has been able to establish itself as the strongest of the two major ecologist parties. In the 1995 presidential election, Voynet was the only ecology candidate able to run for president. The GE candidate Brice Lalonde dropped out of the presidential race after his share of the votes was predicted to be one-half of one percent. (“Ecologist Lalonde...”) Waechter also was forced to drop his own bid for the presidency, running under another ecology party of his own creation, when he failed to achieve the minimum five hundred elected officials’ signatures. The presidential campaign gave Voynet and the Verts a great deal of publicity, allowing their party platform to be heard by the country. Voynet campaigned for many left-wing ideals, such as cutting the work week from 39 to 35 hours without loss of pay. Her platform also included such ecologist issues as the phasing out of nuclear power plants in France and the halting of nuclear testing. (Raitberger) Voynet also championed women's rights, calling for equal rights and pay for women along with male-female quotas in politics. In the election, Voynet did about as well as expected, obtaining only about one million votes, or 3.3 percent. (Cole, p. 334) However, the party was successful in that Lionel Jospin, the Socialist presidential candidate, publicly recognized some of the Verts' platforms.

Some think the Verts may have even greater success in the 1998 elections. Unlike
their previous leader Waechter, Voynet is willing to cooperate with other parties, especially with those on the left. Recently, she met with Lionel Jospin and the communist presidential candidate Robert Hue in a Green party forum. They have agreed to set up an alliance for the 1998 elections to increase left wing representation in the government. ("French Green...") Such an alliance would significantly increase the chances of a Verts candidate being elected.

Chances for Success of Both Parties

Could the Verts or the Front National ever become as successful as the RPR or PS? In order for this to happen, both the political system and the parties themselves would need to change in several significant ways. The greatest help to both parties would be the reintroduction of proportional representation. This would help party members obtain higher political offices, breaking up the virtual monopoly of the mainstream parties. The elected officials from the smaller parties then would be able to implement some of their party's ideals, showing the voters their ideas in action. This would add credibility to these smaller parties and might even help them obtain more votes from mainstream voters.

A second way for smaller parties to become more popular would be to revamp their public images. Le Pen would have to tone down his comments in the hope that voters would forget some of his past comments that many labeled as racist. The Verts would need for voters to forget their disorganized, confused beginnings. The Verts also would have to set themselves apart from their many rival ecologist parties through better publicity and greater name recognition. Both parties would also have to dissociate themselves from their past and show promise of a strong, focused future for the party.

A third way to gain more voters would be to eliminate or modify some of its less socially acceptable platforms. For example, the FN would have to moderate some of its more reactionary and borderline racist platforms on such issues as immigration. Currently, too many voters feel uncomfortable with many of the Front's views. The Verts would need to modify or eliminate some of their more radical demands, such as eliminating nuclear power plants in France. Since nuclear power is the main source of energy in France, this idea is not popular among voters. In short, some compromises would have to be made within the parties to heighten voter appeal.

Still another way for these parties to obtain mainstream status would be to create alliances with mainstream parties. Creating party alliances would enhance a smaller party's credibility by showing voters that the mainstream parties are willing to work with them. This also could help the smaller party directly in elections. For example, if the allied party did not advance to the second round and the small party candidate did, the allied party might encourage its voters to vote for the small party in the second round. The Verts have begun to do this by entering into some potentially helpful alliances with parties on the left, while the FN have not been able to enter into any alliances due to the group's far right politics.

Conclusion

What is the likelihood that either of these parties will implement these changes? It is doubtful that the FN would ever choose to do so. As mentioned earlier, the party was founded on the principle of stopping immigration. As long as Le Pen is the leader of the FN, immigration will continue to be the group's central focus. It is unlikely that Le Pen would ever moderate his position on issues, although he might try to disguise them if the anti-racism laws are ever implemented. It would take a huge shift to the right in the country's political climate or a major change in the party's political ideals for the National Front to become more mainstream.

On the other hand, the Verts have already begun to change. The Verts recently have become a better organized group under a well-known leader. Voynet has expressed a willingness to work with other parties and has even set up an alliance with the left. Through their potential alliance with the left and more widespread publicity of the group and their platforms, the Verts may substantially increase their success in the next elections and could one day even become a mainstream party.
As for small parties in general, many of them face problems similar to those of the Front National and the Verts. Proportional representation elections along with better organization, more publicity, and socially acceptable platforms would increase their chances for success. But as these groups rise in number, they will increasingly threaten the domination of the four mainstream parties over French politics. Put simply, in the future small political parties have the potential to have a significant impact both on the mainstream parties and on the entire French political system.

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