9

The French Agendas Project

Emiliano Grossman

The French Agendas Project (FAP) was initiated in 2005 by Sylvain Brouard and Emiliano Grossman. Frank Baumgartner was closely associated with the project from the beginning. The main motivation for the project was the will to remedy to the lack of quantitative series concerning the activity and relations of political institutions in France. The US Policy Agendas Project appeared as a rather original way of filling this void, while engaging in innovative research and joining a nascent international network of scholars engaged in comparable projects in other countries. The project has evolved strongly since, and the two initiators continue to work on the project.

9.1 The French Political System

France is famous for its semi-presidential political system. This essentially boils down to a system with separate presidential and parliamentary elections, much like in a classical presidential system. Unlike in the latter, however, there is also a prime minister, who is the effective head of government. However, the prime minister is not only responsible to the lower chamber, but also to the president. Under this "presidential" version of semi-presidential government (cf. Duverger et al., 1997), the president, while usually not dealing with day-to-day government business, is the effective head of the executive. The prime minister submits all major decisions to the president's scrutiny and all ministers are approved by the president. While the extent of presidential involvement has varied, it has usually been extensive and the president's role in day-to-day politics has rather increased over time.

Under "divided government" or "cohabitation" (in French), the system reverts to a more classical version of parliamentary government with a prime

minister who is the effective head of government and a president who is confined to more representational functions, while continuing to monitor closely the "reserved areas", i.e., foreign policy and defense. This has often led to tensions, especially as the next presidential election approaches. Cohabitation had become quite common since 1986 with three major periods of divided government. Following a constitutional reform in 2000, bringing the presidential term in line with the parliamentary term, however, cohabitation has become less likely, as the presidential and the parliamentary elections take place only about six weeks apart. In the three presidential/legislative elections that have taken place since the reform, newly elected presidents have confirmed their majority in subsequent legislative elections.

Beyond intra-executive relations, France features a comparatively weak parliament (Kerrouche, 2006), despite some reinforcements introduced in 2008. The executive, usually based on a multiparty coalition, mostly controls the parliamentary agenda, especially in the more important lower chamber. The vast majority of laws originate in government bills and even the few member bills that are adopted every year usually imply prior government approval to stand a chance on the floor. The Senate can be overruled by the lower chamber, following article 45. This leads de facto to a suspensive veto, even if open conflict between the two chambers is rare.

Until recently, the party system was dominated by a left-wing and a right-wing block. The former was dominated by the Socialist Party, but also included the Greens, the Communist Party and, more recently, the Parti de gauche. The conservative block was made up of the Union pour un mouvement populaire, recently rebranded Les Républicains, and the centrists. Both blocks usually conclude pre-electoral agreements regarding candidacies in the 577 constituencies. The 2017 election upset the classical pattern, leading to a substantial weakening of both blocs, but more particularly of the Socialist Party, significantly diminished electorally. It has been all but replaced by the new party created by Emmanuel Macron, La République en marche, which obtained an absolute majority of seats in the 2017 legislative elections, following Macron's victorious presidential bid.

The electoral system, a two-round plurality system with a threshold to reach the second round, favors pre-electoral arrangements, though negotiations between the rounds are not uncommon. This has usually excluded the far-right party Front national from representation at the national level. Despite its leaders' historical results at the 2017 presidential election, the party only obtained eight seats at the legislative elections a few weeks later.

Finally, there is a highly active Constitutional Council that has the particularity of mainly deciding on the constitutionality of laws *before* they come into force. This has changed recently, but continues apply to the vast majority of

decisions. In terms of constitutional review, it is among the more interventionist courts in Europe (Brouard, 2009).

9.2 Datasets

Today there is a variety of datasets available that have been coded using the harmonized CAP codebook (see Table 9.1). These datasets have been collected over a long period starting in 2005. While the most important coding operations are completed, there is an effort to regularly update already existing datasets.

The heart of CAP are laws. Data concerning laws have been the first data collected for most national projects and this is where the first comparisons were possible. And, finally, this is where we tested and consolidated our coding techniques. Generally speaking, we preferred human coding for all "small" datasets, i.e., all those that could reasonably be coded manually. Like other projects, we developed a consolidated training dataset where coders had to achieve a minimum of correct codes (85 percent). All manually coded datasets, moreover, were comprehensively checked by one of the two principal investigators. The laws dataset moreover includes a variety of qualitative information regarding the context of adoption.

A second major source of data was the weekly government council meeting summaries. These documents have been systematically published, probably since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Thanks to the support of government information services, we were able establish a consolidated database that goes back to 1974. Government councils include the president, the prime minister, and all plenary ministries, as well as other cabinet members if requested. Council meetings include four categories of agenda items: government bills, communications, governmental decrees, and appointments. Government bills provide

Table 9.1. Datasets of the French Agendas Project

Dataset	Period covered	N
Laws	1978–2017	3,069
Government bills	1974–2013	2,904
Government communications	1974–2013	6,447
Government decrees ('ordonnances')	1974–2013	1,118
Presidential New Year's speech	1981–2017	3,523
Prime minister speeches at the Assemblée nationale	1981–2012	6,538 (sentences)
Constitutional Council Decisions	1951–2009	3,612
Parliamentary questions	1996–2010	334,247
Party programs	1981–2012	24,467 (sentences)
Le Monde (national quality newspaper)	1981–2013	55,768
8pm news shows for the two major broadcasting networks	1986–2008	302,962

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—France

the list of all important government bills, but exclude a certain number of bills, such as bills ratifying bilateral agreements. The constitution stipulates that the latter have to be ratified by law, and make up a very substantial share of adopted laws (up to 40 percent in certain parliamentary sessions), but are de facto waved through parliament in fast-track mode. Communications are a rather heterogeneous category that includes government statements on some issue of current concern, as well as presentations of long-term programs in some policy areas or an expertise on the effects and problems of a particular policy program. Government decrees are a classical decree-law device that requires a prior delegation vote by the assembly (art. 38 of the constitution). This has been of varying importance: historically quite rare, decree-laws became very common between 2000 and 2005, but their importance diminished again thereafter. We did not code appointments, which include a very long series of official appointments that have to be ratified by the Government Council.

A third series of datasets are the speeches. The only regular speech is the New Year's speech of the president. Unlike the Queen's Speech in the United Kingdom or the US State of the Union speech, it has a lot of non-political content that limits its usefulness. We have therefore also coded the prime minister's speeches in the lower chamber of parliament. These speeches often contain general policy declarations, but may sometimes focus on just one major issue of concern. Moreover, those speeches are not very regular, as they follow an initiative on behalf of the prime minister herself or a no-confidence motion. Speeches were divided into quasi-sentences, double-coded and cross-checked by one of the two principal investigators.

The French team has been among the first to code party programs using the CAP codebook for France (Brouard et al., 2014) and other countries. Like before, this has been done using quasi-sentences, double-coding, and systematic cross-checks.

Media contents, finally, have been coded using automatic coding, rather than manual coding, and, in particular, RTexttools, the coding package developed within CAP (Jurka et al., 2013). Three independent datasets are available in this area. We coded the front page of the quality newspaper *Le Monde* over a period of twenty-eight years. This amounts to close to sixty thousand news items. The datasets include the 8pm news shows in the two major French networks between 1986 and 2008. This amounts to several hundred thousand news items. Machine learning and automatized coding thus represented the only way to code this amount of data. A disadvantage of this procedure, however, is that "rare" codes are very hard and often impossible to predict. We have therefore restricted coding to "major topics" only: media data thus only distinguishes about twenty different topics. For these we have calculated the quality of prediction. Whenever this quality fell below the human "gold

standard", i.e. 85 percent of correct predictions, we conducted a systematic rereading of the coded items. For those codes that reached the expected standard, only samples were controlled.

9.3 Specificities and Perspectives

From the beginning, the main goal of the French Agendas Project was to improve our understanding of the institutional setup and practices of the French political system. The study of the latter had been dominated by lawyers and was strongly focused on institutional history and rules. The members of the team felt a resolutely empirical approach to French politics and institutions was necessary. In particular, it seemed necessary to test some long-established hypotheses about law-making, executive pre-eminence or the behavior of the Constitutional Council. Given the weakness of quantitative research in French political science, institutions and policymaking were mainly studied through case studies, allowing for very limited inference and generalization. The goal was therefore to provide an infrastructure for the empirical study of institutions and policymaking in France.

A related objective was to put France back on the map of comparative political science. The absence of comparative data for France, maybe excluding large surveys, such as the European Electoral Survey or the World Value Survey, has led over time to a true anti-comparative bias in case studies on France. As is often the case, one-case specialists tend to stress the unique traits of their case, deliberately limiting and sometimes even preventing comparison. The thesis of "French exceptionalism" was part of the long-established dogmas that the French Agendas Project aims to contradict.

These goals were partially achieved a few years later with two edited volumes that included many empirical studies on France's fifth Republic, though only some of the chapters and articles relied on Agendas data (Brouard et al., 2009; Grossman and Sauger, 2009). The study of French institutions became more and more developed as a consequence of these studies.

Increasingly other goals emerged as the possibilities linked to the new data became apparent. Early on members of the project focused on the evolution and possibility of partisan government in France (Baumgartner, Brouard, and Grossman, 2009; Baumgartner, Foucault, and François, 2009; Froio et al., 2012). The coding of party programs has allowed for a novel approach to party issue profiles and issue competition in France (Brouard et al., 2014) and beyond (ongoing). Other work focused on the institutional constraints and the consequences of divided government, comparing France to the United States (Baumgartner et al., 2014). These contributions have adopted often novel perspectives, either by introducing the French case into comparative studies
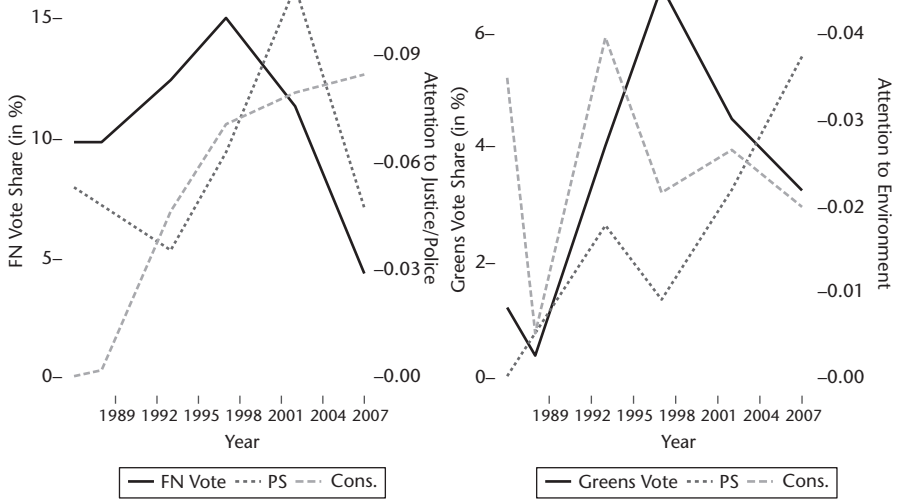
Figure 9.1. The impact of niche party vote on issue attention
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—France

or, simply, by allowing a new analysis of the French case to develop. A good case in point is the study of cap-coded French party programs. As CAP codes attention, rather than direction, this has allowed for interesting analyses concerning the evolution of political debate in France, as Figure 9.1 illustrates.

Figure 9.1, inspired by the work in Brouard et al. (2014), presents the results of the vote for niche parties with a strong issue focus on attention to those topics in the other parties' programs over time. In both cases, the results or the anticipated results of niche parties in general elections have a strong impact on attention to those parties' pet issues among government parties. Here we include the two main government parties, i.e., the Socialist Party and the Conservatives (Cons.), who have run under two different names over the period considered (RPR, UMP).[1]

A lot of other issues lie ahead. Many of the series, especially concerning the media or speeches by the prime minister, remain, so far, under-exploited. Related projects concerning parties are currently comparing issue attention with specific pledges. Moreover, a paper devoted to the specific contributions of CAP to the understanding of French politics is under way.

Note

1. They changed their name again after the 2012 general election to "Les Républicains."

References

Baumgartner, F., Brouard, S., and Grossman, E. (2009). Agenda-Setting Dynamics in France: Revisiting the 'Partisan Hypothesis'. *French Politics*, 7(2): 75–95.

Baumgartner, F. R., Brouard, S., Grossman, E. et al. (2014). Divided Government, Legislative Productivity, and Policy Change in the USA and France. *Governance*, 27(3): 423–47.

Baumgartner, F. R., Foucault, M., and François, A. (2009). Public Budgeting in the French Fifth Republic: The End of La Republique des partis? *West European Politics*, 32(2): 404–22.

Brouard, S. (2009). The Politics of Constitutional Veto in France: Constitutional Council, Legislative Majority and Electoral Competition. *West European Politics*, 32(2): 384–403.

Brouard, S., Appleton, A. M., and Mazur, A. G. (2009). *The French Fifth Republic at Fifty: Beyond Stereotypes*. London: Palgrave.

Brouard, S., Grossman, E., and Guinaudeau, I. (2014). The Evolution of the French Political Space Revisited. In *Agenda Setting, Policies, and Political Systems: A Comparative Approach*, ed. C. Green-Pedersen, and S. Walgrave. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 53–68.

Duverger, M., Lijphart, A., and Pasquino, G. (1997). A New Political System. *European Journal of Political Research*, 31(1–2): 125–46.

Froio, C., Guinaudeau, I., and Persico, S. (2012). Action publique et partis politique. *Gouvernement et action publique*, 1(1): 11–35.

Grossman, E., and Sauger, N. (2009). The Fifth Republic at Fifty (Special Issue). *West European Politics*, 32(2).

Jurka, T. P., Collingwood, L., Boydstun, A. E. et al. (2013). RTextTools: A Supervised Learning Package for Text Classification. *The R Journal*, 5(1): 6–12.

Kerrouche, E. (2006). The French Assemblée nationale: The Case of a Weak Legislature? *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 12(3–4): 336–65.