

Preface

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The French presidential election of 2007 had something for everyone: vivid personalities, bold electoral strategies, dramatic developments. For political scientists this election presented an exciting opportunity to investigate the process by which voters reach their electoral decisions in a modern democracy. Among these modern democracies, France is a particularly interesting case, with a number of unique characteristics that provide the opportunity for a different "take" on the way in which campaigns affect election outcomes; and the 2007 presidential election constituted a departure from recent electoral developments worthy of close investigation.

French elections differ from elections in other established democracies in that a far larger proportion of the French electorate comes into the campaign in a state of indecision than they do elsewhere. At the start of the campaign nearly half the electorate declared themselves to be undecided regarding who would will vote for – nearly two thirds of younger voters. And around half of those who vote do not decide who will receive their vote until election day! The number of those who, in France, hesitate between different parties and candidates provides a wonderful opportunity to investigate the process of electoral decision-making: the purpose of this book.

Moreover, the 2007 French presidential election was particularly interesting in that it represented a "return to normalcy" after decades of declining turnout and rises in protest voting. This election yielded higher turnout than any in recent memory, and a lower proportion of votes for extremist parties – an encouraging development for those of us who see in French politics a bellweather for developments elsewhere.

This book focuses on "le temps court" – the period of the election campaign itself – but this period is placed in context of "le temps long" – the time during which a member of the French electorate gains her political orientations and habits. The distinction between these two political times – and the distinction between both of these and the decision itself – provides a helpful framework within which to understand the decision-making process. Indeed, this book is full of analytic distinctions of this kind that help the reader to stay oriented and make sense of the unrolling story.

Another way in which the book helps the reader to stay oriented is by placing the French electoral experience in a comparative context. The book not only informs us about French politics but shows us in what ways French politics are similar to or different from politics elsewhere. This concern with placing France in comparative perspective is, of course, particularly helpful for foreign readers; but it also provides a framework within which French readers will find it easier to follow the story that is presented.

This story is not unlike the story about election campaigns worldwide. Everywhere campaigns apparently serve to crystallize orientations that are only partially formed until an approaching electoral contest forces people to focus on the decision at hand. Still, France is also different in the extent to which voters remain undecided and in the extent of electoral volatility – especially volatility that involves alternating allegiances among parties on one side or the other of the left-right divide. Precisely why French voters should be so volatile and so liable to indecision is not one of the questions that this book addresses specifically, but a tantalizing aside in the course of the first chapter suggests a possible role for the electoral system itself which, in forcing many voters to shift their choice to a different candidate between rounds of the election, might militate against the acquisition of strong partisan attachments.

A particular strength of the approach adopted in this book is its focus on the nature and extent of indecision in the minds of voters. The surveys on which it is based asked voters, in each successive wave of interviews, which candidates were possible recipients of their votes – a more explicit approach than the customary alternative of asking voters to rate the parties or candidates in terms of likes/dislikes or in terms of the chances of ever voting for them. The approach used in this book works well and enables the authors to paint a picture of the structure of electoral competition as this evolves over the course of the campaign, with some candidates becoming better placed while others become less likely to make the 'final cut' in terms of choice. The use that the authors make of these questions is exemplary and may well lead to their adoption to study evolving campaign dynamics in other countries. The question '*quels sont tous ceux pour lesquels vous pourriez voter?*' provides a useful complement to the notion of indecision, permitting the authors of this volume to specify exactly the extent of this indecision and the way in which it evolves over the course of the campaign. Indecision in the presidential election of 2007 was

extensive, with 30% of survey respondents mentioning two parties, 18% mentioning three parties, and 13% mentioning four or more as possible recipients of their votes. This means that two thirds of voters during the campaign were "in play" in the competition for votes – an extraordinary number. The way in which voters used the information that they gained from the campaign in order to select among these parties is a primary focus of the book.

This book represents contemporary French political science at its best: grappling with important questions by employing cutting-edge tools and theories drawn from the international political science literature, but augmenting these tools and theories as appropriate with approaches designed specifically for the French case. It will be widely read.

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