

# Women in Politics During the Fifth French Republic (1958-2005)

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**Résumé :** La France a reconnu aux femmes les droits politiques très tard, en 1944, même si le suffrage universel masculin avait déjà été établi en 1848. Ce paradoxe est le symbole d'une démocratie entre « frères » (Sineau 2001, p.1). Le droit d'éligibilité des femmes a été, en fait, mis entre parenthèses par les pratiques nées des nouvelles institutions: la Cinquième prend le caractère d'une république mono-sexe, qui va assurer durablement aux hommes le monopole légitime de la politique. Il faudra attendre les années '90 pour voir finalement une volonté effective des dirigeants politiques de résoudre ce déficit démocratique. Le parcours qui a mené les femmes françaises à se voir reconnus les droits fondamentaux est long et riche d'obstacles. Cet exposé veut donc analyser, d'abord, les raisons qui peuvent expliquer le «déficit paritaire » pendant les années de la «politique virile» sous les présidences de Charles de Gaulle et de Georges Pompidou. En suite, on analysera l'ouverture vers la «mixité » de Valéry Giscard d'Estaing et de François Mitterrand pour voir finalement arriver, en dernier lieu, l' «âge des réformes» avec le gouvernement de Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) et l'approbation de la loi du 6 Juin 2000, dite «sur la parité», ses effets et ses limites.

**Key words:** French women, French political life, feminine condition, political rights, political functions, Feminist Movement

## Introduction

« L'égalité des sexes n'est pas dans la 'nature' des choses.  
Elle serait plutôt une longue et difficile conquête d'une civilité inachevée  
où les obstacles ont été sans nombre.  
Pour les vaincre, il a fallu sans doute la complicité des hommes  
et surtout l'énergie des femmes. »  
Michelle Perrot, *Le Monde*, August 31, 1995.

This statement perfectly highlights the meaning of the historical and political path that brought France to finally approve the law n° 2000-493 of 6 June 2000 that aims to favour “the equal access of women and men” in the exercise of political functions and electoral mandates. France was one of the latest European countries to recognize political rights to women, although it has been the first to establish the male universal suffrage (in 1848). This paradox is, *per se*, a symbol: that of a democracy among “brothers”<sup>1</sup>, that denies women's right to enter in the club of citizens until the half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. The path that brought French women to have recognised their fundamental civil rights, first, and political rights, after, is notably long and full of obstacles: for a long time, women have been the “forgotten of History”<sup>2</sup>, an History that rarely considers the difference between the sexes as a factor of change.

The struggle for the recognition of women's rights in France already started after the Revolution of 1789. However, it was only during the XX<sup>th</sup> century that we can perceive a real will of the political class and of the French society to finally make progress in this sense. The right to vote, both actively and passively, was in fact recognised to women only in 1944 with the famous “ordonnance” of April 21, signed by the provisional government of General De Gaulle and proposed by the communist Fernand Grenier, member of the provisional constituent Assembly in Algeri. The Parliament had already tried several times to approve this law between the two World Wars but the Senate, stronghold of male monopoly of power par excellence, systematically rejected it. Despite all this, it has taken 56 more years to transform an equality *de iure* into an equality *de facto*.

Even after the beginning of the Fifth Republic, in 1958, men have closed their eyes for a long-time, and refused to listen to women's voice and their request for equality. The right of eligibility has been, in facts, put between parentheses by the practices born from the new institutions: the Fifth Republic is characterised as monosexual, and it will assure stably the legitimate monopoly of politics to men for the years to come.

It has been necessary the choc of the 1970s and in particular the engagement of the Feminist Movement to obtain the approval of laws such as the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy law (*loi Veil sur l'IVG*) or the law on consensual divorce (both approved in 1975). In spite of all this, women's political rights persisted to be under-exercised, obstructed by partisan mechanisms of candidates selection, an electoral system (nominal majority vote) that always favoured notables (obviously men), the accumulation of mandates and, as a consequence, the aging and the closure in elitism of the entire French political class. A significant responsibility has to be assigned to the French Feminist Movement itself since it didn't claim the political power for women, or it exercise pressure on parties in the 1970s, when it was stronger.

However in the 1990s the scenario is totally different: changes in the relationship between the sexes, the increasing level of education of women and their massive entrance in the labour market and the legalization of contraception allow French women to become conscious of their exclusion from the political domain and therefore to start claiming for it. The political class couldn't keep on ignoring them. Regardless this taking of consciousness, it will be necessary to wait until the 1990s and the cohabitation between Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin to see finally an effective will of political leaders (of both right and left parties) to solve this "democratic deficit" that prevent women from achieving their political rights: that is, when parity becomes a "*domaine partagé*" (a shared domain).

The result will be the approval of the law 2000-493 of June 6, 2000, named "*sur la parité*", a fundamental law for what it represents at the political level. A law, however, that cannot be said sufficient and decisive for a continued situation of gender inequality that persists at the electoral level. Finally, a law that is surely a compromise, not perfect but that can be improved and that can introduce a real change in the French political mentality. The road to parity has been rich of obstacles and failures and there have been many years of immobility due to the absence of will of the French (male!) political class, not very favourable to open up towards the "*mixité*".

Therefore this paper wants first to analyse the reasons that can explain the lack of equality between women and men during the mandates of Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. Afterwards, we will analyse the opening towards the «*mixité*» of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand, to finally end up with the «*âge des réformes*» with the government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) and the approval of law 2000-493 of June 6, 2000, named "*sur la parité*", its effects and its limitations.

### **The years of masculine politics. Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou**

After the elections in November 1946, women in Parliament were 35 out of 619 (26 from the Communist Party), that is 5,6%. The coming of the Fifth Republic in 1958 with the strong personality of its creator, Charles de Gaulle, put all this into question. The newly born political regime could be qualified as the "republic of men", in fact the rate of female representation in the parliament fell down to 1,9% only. This regression to a mono-sexual Gaullist view of politics can be explained considering both the personality of the leader itself and his ideas about the division of social work between the sexes, but also considering the institutional reforms that were carried out.

Female voters were seen by General de Gaulle first of all as wives and mothers, rather than possible public officials: the attention that he devoted to the aspirations and needs of new generations of women has been second-rate. He perceived women as an element of disorder, a "*source of complications*"<sup>3</sup>. This presidential practice of exclusion of the female gender is surely to be related to de Gaulle's military (and masculine) vision of the administration. With this Republic, women started a long "*traversée du désert*"<sup>4</sup>. Until 1978, women in parliament continued to be under 2% and under De Gaulle presidential mandates, only two women were appointed to governmental offices.

However, the obstacles to women's entrance into the political arena are to be found also in the institutional reforms and in the electoral laws that decreed strong exclusion mechanisms. Ministers were progressively selected among the administrative and bureaucratic élite coming from the ENA (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*), where women were very few, rather than within parliamentarians. Furthermore, the new electoral law (two-rounds uninominal majority vote) eased the personalization of elections, giving advantage to notables and incumbent candidates (evidently, mainly men), and it revealed to be very unfavourable for women. In addition, the increasing local power of elected caused a widening of the practice to accumulate political mandates.

Finally, the direct election of the President introduced in 1962 reinforced the symbolism of the strong man, now also consecrated by the popular vote. On the other hand, from that moment on, presidential candidates couldn't ignore the fact that women constituted half of their electorate. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that de Gaulle himself signed in 1965 the reform for enabling married women to work without the permission of their husband and to administrate their assets autonomously, exactly five months before the end of his mandate.

A part from this later element, being *femme politique* under de Gaulle and Pompidou's presidencies revealed to be a destiny of exception: in fifteen years and three mandates women are very few, almost not existing within the ministerial élite and progressively decreasing in the Parliament. This male predominance of the political class is even more paradoxical if we do consider that women were going through an historical moment of progressive economic prosperity and emancipation: the reform of marriage (July 13, 1965) and the legalization of contraception seemed to question the patriarchy, however the political domain continued to escape them.

The neo-Feminist Movement of the early 1970s had surely a huge responsibility for not having claimed to parties a more equal space within the institutions. In sum, women seemed to be conscious that "*politics is not only a bastion that resist to them, but also the tool and the symbol itself of their oppression*"<sup>5</sup>.

## The Opening Towards the "*mixité*"

### *The Presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing*

With the appearance of the Neo-Feminist Movement of the 1970s, the image of women changed. Surely, the French Feminism adopted a strong anti-electoral position that produced a number of important achievement on the side of the self-disposition of women but that fundamentally ignored the issue of the political representation. However, the mandate of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was equally influenced by the Feminist wave. During the presidential electoral campaign of 1974, both Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand were aware that the political change would have passed through the hands of women. Moreover, for the first time a young woman, Arlette Laguiller, leader of *Lutte ouvrière*, ran for the presidency.

Once elected, in a speech at the *Elisée*, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing made the wish that his mandate would have been marked by the complete recognition of women's rights and responsibilities in the French society<sup>6</sup>. His will to feminize politics was linked to his project of modernization of the French Republic and produced a number of important changes: an increasing number of women were appointed to governmental positions directly by the President, the first "Ministry for Women's Affairs" was created, in the form of a State Secretariat at the Feminine Condition (conferred to Françoise Giroud), and last but not least, many reforms relevant for women (for instance, the law Veil on abortion in 1975) were proposed directly by political women.

Under Giscard d'Estaing, the female governmental personnel grew from 3% (Pompidou) up to 9,5% and nine women had access to ministerial positions across seven years. The Chirac's government included three women, of which one minister of Public Health (Simone Veil). Equally, the first Barre Government (August 25, 1976- March 29,

1977) included four women of which one Minister, while in the second Barre Government (March 1977- March 1978) women were six (one Minister and five Secretaries of state), with an overall percentage of 15% of women within the governmental élite, an absolute record. However, the offices given to these first women Ministers and Secretaries of State were mainly within the areas of social affairs and education, basically low-prestige offices. Therefore, Giscard d'Estaing was modern in the form but traditional in the essence. Furthermore, the presence of women within the elected assemblies persisted to be very low, around 3,2%. As Florence d'Harcourt stated after the legislative election of March 1978, «*un hémicycle désespérément gris [...] un monde d'hommes, fait par des hommes et pour des hommes*»<sup>7</sup>.

Discouraged to get elected home, French women found fortune through the European Parliament: since the first direct election in 1979 in fact, and helped by a proportional electoral system, the EP represented a ticket for French political women to finally gain some space. Evidently, the fact that these elections were considered second-order with respect to the national ones, made the competition much easier for outsiders. In sum, despite the presidential will to make the participation of women to the government visible, the arbitrary feminization that he operated from the above is not without ambiguities.

### ***The Presidency of François Mitterrand***

François Mitterrand was extremely aware of the strong relationship between modernity and feminine condition since the 1960s. Since the first presidential electoral campaign in 1965, until the one in 1981 when he finally made it to the *Élysée*, he brought a significant attention to the aspirations of women, by promising structural reforms that introduced a 30% quota in the candidatures. Since May 1981, Mitterrand appointed a number of smart, skilled and often young women to occupy some important political offices, both in the government, in his ministerial cabinet, and in the Constitutional Council.

The three Mauroy's governments included six women out of forty members (around 14%), all selected among the President's entourage and many recruited among the parliamentarians rather than within the administration: in sum, some real professionals of politics. In order to renew French politics, Mitterrand pushed this moderate feminist attitude of his until the appointment of Edith Cresson as Prime Minister on May 15, 1991.

A part from this, at the level of parliamentary representation, the female presence still held very low, with a percentage of 5,7% in the elections of 1988, however with a record of female candidatures. Despite the new proportional electoral system, the expectations of women to finally gain an effective visibility continued to be systematically disappointed: on the one hand, political parties (including the *Parti Socialiste* of Mitterrand), showed no will to use the new electoral system in order to promote women's representation; secondly, the new geographical electoral design (*départements*) gave primacy once again to the notables set locally, making the chances to win very few for outsider such as women. It is in the local and municipal assemblies that women finally made, in those years, a major political progress. To conclude, the change in power from Right to Left did not brought any significant change for women.

**Table 1.**  
**Women in Government under the Different Presidential Mandates (1958-2001).**

Period	Total Effectives	Number of Women	% of Women
1959-1969- Charles de Gaulle	83	2	2,4
1969-1974- Georges Pompidou	68	2	3,0
1974-1981- Valéry Giscard d'Estaing	94	9	9,5
1981-1986- François Mitterrand I (Left Government)	70	7	10,0
1986-1988- François Mitterrand I (Right Government)	42	4	9,5
1988-1993- François Mitterrand II (Left Government)	84	13	15,4
1993-1995- François Mitterrand II (Right Government)	30	3	10,0
1995-1997- Jacques Chirac (Right Government)	46	12	26,0
1997-2001 (27/04)- Jacques Chirac (Left Government)	44	14	31,8
Total Fifth Republic	561	66	11,8

Source: Cabannes, 1990, General Secretariat of the *Assemblée nationale*, 1996.

### **"Sur le chemin de la Parité "**

Since the end of the 1980s, a new approach came out in the discourse about women's political under-representation: the idea that only the legislative constraints could end the ostracism of which women were suffering in the electoral life. The conversion of Feminists to the need of juridical reformism was accelerated in France by the analysis of some scholars and intellectuals. The paperback *"Au pouvoir citoyennes! Liberté, égalité, parité"*, edited in 1992, resulted fundamental and contributed to make popular the egalitarian project in France. This later one, brought up a new "political rationality", by opposing to the old political order based on the neutrality and unity of the Citizen a new bi-sexual, dual political order. This new way of thinking democracy, treating politically the problem of the duality of sexes that had been hidden under a unitary discourse, breaks evidently with the classical rhetoric of the neutrality of citizenship.

In June 1996, ten former Ministers, belonging both to Right and Left parties, published a Manifesto in favour of Parity. For the first time, women of different political sides talked with one voice and accused: *"All of us, in a way or another, had to face the incapacity of the French political system to really accept women. From the indulgent indifference and from contempt to declared hostility, we could measure the moat that separates the declared principles from the reality that it's expressed in the behaviour of the political class. Yes, definitely the latter is still unable to accept that women participate with real responsibilities to the management of the affairs of the Nation."*<sup>8</sup>. Largely proclaimed, this appeal proposed different tools to reach *parité* step by step and had a decisive impact on the outcome of the debate. Furthermore, the crisis of representation largely encouraged to claim for institutional reformism; in fact, it contributed to make unbearable what had been tolerated until that moment, that is the masculine monopoly of politics. By that time, the marginalization of women wasn't anymore analyzed exclusively as an unfairness towards them, but considered as a symbol itself of a diseased democracy, along with the accumulation of mandates and the hyper-longevity in office. *Parité* will be since then as a tool to "renew the republican pact" or, in André Vallini's (a French MP) words, a way to "allow French democracy to find her second half"<sup>9</sup>.

Since the presidential election of 1995, the issue of women's power became a main political theme and a challenge for political parties. Many political leaders announced institutional reforms to restructure the sharing of power among genders: in sum, it was a huge political première. Once elected on May 7, 1995, Jacques Chirac followed up what he had promised during the electoral campaign and he created the *Observatoire de la parité entre les femmes et les hommes*. This organization (decree n. 95-1114 of October 18, 1995) was chaired by the Prime Minister, Alain Juppé and his general director was Roselyne Bachelot. The initial aims of the *Observatoire* were to work as source of information on the feminine condition and to promote gender equality within the legislators through some specific programs, along with the production of recommendation and legislative proposals. Every two years, the *Observatoire* has to transmit a report to the Prime Minister, and this is presented to the Parliament and published. Despite the fact that the area of action of this body is extremely broad, its activities mainly focus on parity in politics, a domain in which its works stand as a reference point for other studies conducted elsewhere. Furthermore, since the approval of the law of June 6, 2000, the *Observatoire* is in charge to evaluate its implementation, by analysing the electoral results, the statistics compared according to gender and by interviewing the actors involved in the implementation, such as political leaders, lawyers, associations, etc.

Along with this, the new Head of state opened to women the way to enter the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic. His team of counsellors included seven women, around 15% of the total, and a woman, Anne Lhéritier, was chosen as Head of the cabinet. Within the government, twelve women were called but all were appointed to the less prestigious posts. Even his party, the RPR, during Chirac's presidency didn't do anything to facilitate women's election. It is somewhat paradoxical, given this context, that it has been during this presidential mandate that the most important and radical legislative and institutional reforms in the area of female representation took place. However, the reforms were not carried out with the same speed during the two Alain Juppé's governments and the Left government by Lionel Jospin.

### ***The Rise to Power of Lionel Jospin With the Gauche Plurielle***

June 1997 marked a breakpoint in women and France's history. First of all, women themselves participated to the victorious struggle of the Left: far from being only passive spectators of the political alternation, such as in 1981, women became the fundamental protagonists of it and they will benefit from it. For the first time in the lower House, the percentage of women MP surpassed 10% and in the government women represented more than 30%<sup>10</sup> of the personnel and they were appointed to prestigious offices (for instance, Labour and Solidarity, *Aménagement du territoire*, Communication and Environment, etc.). This voluntarism of Socialists in promoting women's political participation clearly stood up against the conservative policy of the Right during the two years of the Juppé government. However, it was also a break with the Socialist policy of hesitation of the Mitterrand's era<sup>11</sup>.

The "cultural revolution" operated within the Socialist Party was largely due to his new leader, Lionel Jospin, who played an undeniable personal role in the elaboration of this new political line. In his view, the improvement of the female representation and the limitation in the accumulation of mandates were fundamental tools in order to make French politics more modern and democratic. Furthermore, he personally claimed for the feminization of his party with the struggle for quotas: after the National Congress of June 29-30, 1996 on the «*les acteurs de la démocratie*» in fact, the PS fixed the goal of the 30% of female candidatures in the uninominal scrutiny. It was an absolute première in French politics.

There are several reasons that brought Jospin to undertake this dynamic of feminization<sup>12</sup>, starting from his personal outrage for the discrimination of which women suffered. Beside this, undoubtedly he suffered a strong internal pressure from the female

members of his party. However and primarily, Jospin had understood the political benefit that could come from the renovation of the party and a new feminist image<sup>13</sup>. Despite his first scepticism about the feasibility of juridical parity, he lately abandoned his perplexities and he declared to be in favour of a constitutional revision in order to inscribe the principle of *parité* in a law. Many argued that was his wife, the well-known philosopher and propagandist of *parité* Sylviane Agacinski, to secretly inspire the reform: Jospin himself admitted during an interview that the philosophical reflection of his wife in her paperback “*Politique de sexes*”, had «*exercé une influence*» on him<sup>14</sup>.

The electoral success of the Left did not brought only a feminization of the legislative and executive power but it also started a dynamic of political reforms that did accelerate the inclusion of women in the *cité*. Jospin’s *Gauche Plurielle*, in fact, gave impulse to a number of relevant reforms such as the 35 hours contract, young work, CMU (*Couverture Maladie Universelle*), civil unions (PACS- *Pacte Civil de Solidarité*) and gender equality (*parité*). In his speech of June 19, 1997, just after the electoral success of the *Gauche Plurielle*, Jospin declared «*Il faut d’abord permettre aux Françaises de s’engager sans entraves dans la vie publique [...] Une révision de la Constitution, afin d’y inscrire l’objectif de la parité entre les femmes et les hommes, sera proposée*».

For what concerns the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, although he had always been reticent to commit himself in favour of gender parity and openly hostile to the limitation of the accumulation of electoral mandates, in 1998 he became the ally of Jospin in pursuing this goal<sup>15</sup>. The political calculus there was in order to gain popularity, since the French electorate’s disaffection to politics had become a serious political emergency. Parity and the limitation of mandates could realize citizens’ expectations about a renewal of the French political élite. Therefore, since the moment in which Chirac declared his consent about the constitutional revision to the Prime Minister, the process became faster, despite the attempts of senators to stop the reform. It is important to underline that no constitutional change would have been possible without the agreement between the two leaders. This situation ended with the approval of the laws n. 2000-294 on the incompatibility between elective mandates, and n. 2000-295 on the limitation of their accumulation.

### ***The Constitutional and Legislative Reforms (1999-2003)***

The government transmitted the proposal for a constitutional law in the National Assembly on June 18, 1998. The latter approved in it unanimously on March 10, 1999. The reform became effective with the vote of the two Houses, assembled in congress in Versailles on June 28, 1999<sup>16</sup>. The text (741 favourable, 43 against, 48 abstainers) became the constitutional law n. 99-569 of July 8, 1999 on the equality between women and men. The new version of article 3 of the Constitution (on the national sovereignty and the universality of suffrage) states that “*the law favours the equal access to electoral mandates and elective functions to women and men*”. Article 4 specifies that political parties “*contribute to the implementation [of this principle] in the terms determined by the law*”. The word “parity” never appears in the text. Reasons lie on the belief that the word itself could evoke the idea of a perfect mathematical parity that would have been almost impossible to reach. Clearly there are other political explanations: the word “equality” was used in order to avoid the contrary vote of Right MPs.

Mariette Sineau (2001, p.191) reports a number of strong criticisms that were moved to this law, comparing it to an empty shell, by both Left-oriented and Right-wing political women and party members such as Gisèle Salimi, Roselyne Bachelot, Yvette Roudy and Muguette Jacquaint. They all claimed for the need to give application to this law by approving some other legislative texts. Jospin himself declared in front of the two branches of Parliament that formal equality needed to become effective. However the constitutional reform introduced a fundamental change, by proposing a re-definition of the concept of the

sovereign people: there's a shift from a paradigm to another, from an abstract, neutral, universal definition of citizenship to another that finally presents it as dual, male and female.

In December 1999, the Jospin's government approved a legislative proposal on parity of women and men. The proposal was highly modified by the *Assemblée Nationale* and became stricter for what concerns the obligations for parties. According to the provisions of the ultimate text, the law n. 2000-493 of June 6, 2000 "*intended to favour the equal access of women and men to electoral mandates and elective functions*", parties were obliged to present 50% of candidates for each sex for all the elections with electoral list, on pain of the exclusion of the lists from the electoral competition. The alternation of female and male candidates in the list was mandatory, from the beginning until the end (man/women or women/man) for all the one-stage elections (European Parliament and Senate in the most densely populated *départements*<sup>17</sup>). For the elections that count two stages (regional, municipals in towns with more than 3500 inhabitants and for the elections of the *Assemblée de Corse*), parity should have been respected every six candidates. For the legislative elections, the law does not contemplate any obligation of parity but simply a financial penalty for parties that do not respect the requirement of 50% of candidates of each sex. The aid of state received in proportion of the number of votes gained at the first stage of the election will be diminished of "*a percentage equal to the half of the gap between the number of candidates of each sex compared to the total number of candidates*".

The law, although it did not produce significant increases in all the elective bodies (we will analyse this point later), surely assured a relevant improvement of female presence within the Senate: in 2001, 21,6% of the newly elected ( among 1/3 of the overall Senate) were women, thanks to the introduction of the proportional system. Unfortunately, once the Right came back to government, in 2003 the Parliament approved a law that seriously undermined the efficacy of the law on parity on the Senate elections.

### ***The Effects of the Law and Its Limitations***

The coming into force of the law of June 6, 2000 called "*sur la parité*" should had undoubtedly modified, according to its premises, the composition of the main representative assemblies of France. Actually, data show, at least in that early first years, that this egalitarian revolution did not took place. Surely, the optimistic atmosphere that surrounded this law just after its approval did not permit to clearly see its limitations and weaknesses. These latter are principally of three:

- The fact that the application of the law was different according to the kind of scrutiny. The obligation to respect a strict equality in the candidature should have been imposed to all the elections and in particular the legislative and senatorial ones.
- This "discrimination" among elections seems to create a hierarchy among them. The impression it creates is that the legislators wanted to keep the privilege of political parties to choose their candidates without the obligation of gender alternation in the lists for the key elections, namely, the legislative scrutiny.
- Finally, the sanctions provided for avoiding parties' misbehaviour were evidently weak, if not the total inadequate to discourage them to not respect the law.

### ***The Results***

Despite all its limitations and weaknesses, the law on parity proved to be successful in increasing the number of women in the elected bodies. We can argue that this increase has been sometimes insufficient, disappointing, not coherent but it is a fact and data confirm this. In fact, since the approval of the law up to now, the only French political institution in which the number of women did decrease (from 30,8% in 1997 to 19% in 2004, see table 2) was the government, for which, evidently the law don't apply since it is not elected.



**Table 2**  
**Direct and Indirect Effects of the Law of June 6, 2000**  
**Before the Law “sur la Parité”      After the Law “sur la Parité”      Current (2010)**

<b>Electoral Mandate of Legislative Office</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Progression</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Relative Progression</b>
Legislative	1997	10,9	2002	12,3	<b>+1,4</b>	2007	18,5	<b>+6,2</b>
Senate	2001	10,9	2004	16,9	<b>+6,0</b>	2008	21,9	<b>+5,0</b>
Government	2000	30,8	2004	19,0	<b>-11,7</b>	2010	33,3	<b>+14,3</b>
European Parliament	1999	40,2	2004	43,6	<b>+3,4</b>	2009	44,4	<b>+0,8</b>
Mayor	1995	7,5	2001	10,9	<b>+3,4</b>	2008	13,8	<b>+2,9</b>
Presidency Conseil Générale	2001	1,0	2004	3,0	<b>+2,0</b>	2008	6,1	<b>+3,1</b>
Vice- Presidency Conseil Générale	2001	7,9	2004	12,5	<b>+4,7</b>	2008	-	-
Conseil Générale	2001	9,2	2004	10,4	<b>+1,2</b>	2008	12,3	<b>+1,9</b>
Presidency Conseil Régional	1998	11,5	2004	3,8	<b>-7,7</b>	2010	7,7	<b>+3,9</b>
Vice- Presidency Conseil Régional	1998	15,1	2004	37,3	<b>+22,2</b>	2010	45,5	<b>+18,2</b>
Conseil Régional	1998	27,5	2004	47,6	<b>+20,1</b>	2010	48,0	<b>+0,4</b>
Presidency of EPCI <sup>18</sup>	2001	5,4	2002	5,7	<b>+0,3</b>	2009	7,2	<b>+1,5</b>
Conseil Municipale	1995	21,7	2001	33,0	<b>+11,3</b>	2008	35,0	<b>+2,0</b>

Source : *Observatoire de la parité entre les femmes et les hommes*. Own elaboration.

At the regional and European level, the application of the law “sur la parité” did produce an almost perfect parity among female and male representatives. If we take a look at table 2, in the first election after the introduction of law n. 493-2000, women’s presence among the elected grew up by 11,3% in the municipal councils and by 20,1% in the regional assemblies respectively. The presence of women increased also among the Vice-Presidents of Regional Councils (+22,2% in 2004 and a further +18% in 2010): this data is particularly relevant if we do consider that the law does not apply to this specific election. Where the law partially applies, we find in fact the most limited improvements of women’s presence: in the two Houses, a small +1,6% (*Assemblée Nationale*) and 0,4% (Senate) was registered in 2002. However, considered the most recent elections, female representation within these assemblies continues to slowly grow (Tab. 3 and 4). In sum, a change is taking place but evidently those who hoped for an egalitarian revolution possible through the law of 2000 were proven wrong.

**Table 3**  
**France (1):**  
**Evolution of the Female Representation in the *Assemblée Nationale***  
**(1945-2007)**

<b>Year of Election</b>	<b>Women (%)</b>	<b>Men (%)</b>
<b>1945</b>	<b>5,60%</b>	94,40%
<b>1946</b> <b>(June)</b>	<b>5,10%</b>	94,90%
<b>1946</b> <b>(November)</b>	<b>7,00%</b>	93,00%
<b>1951</b>	<b>3,70%</b>	96,30%
<b>1956</b>	<b>3,20%</b>	96,80%
<b>1958</b>	<b>1,50%</b>	98,50%
<b>1962</b>	<b>1,90%</b>	98,10%
<b>1967</b>	<b>2,30%</b>	97,70%
<b>1968</b>	<b>2,10%</b>	97,90%
<b>1973</b>	<b>2,70%</b>	97,30%
<b>1978</b>	<b>4,30%</b>	95,70%
<b>1981</b>	<b>7,10%</b>	92,90%
<b>1986</b>	<b>6,60%</b>	93,40%
<b>1988</b>	<b>6,90%</b>	93,10%
<b>1993</b>	<b>6,40%</b>	93,60%
<b>1997</b>	<b>10,90%</b>	89,10%
<b>2002</b>	<b>12,20%</b>	87,80%
<b>2007</b>	<b>18,54%</b>	81,46%

Source: IPU, own elaboration

**Table 4**  
**France (2):**  
**Evolution of the Female Representation in the Senate**  
**(1947-2008)**

<b>Year of Election</b>	<b>Women (%)</b>	<b>Men (%)</b>
<b>1947</b>	<b>7,00%</b>	93,00%
<b>1949</b>	<b>3,78%</b>	96,22%
<b>1952</b>	<b>2,84%</b>	97,16%
<b>1954</b>	<b>2,84%</b>	97,16%
<b>1958</b>	<b>2,84%</b>	97,16%
<b>1960</b>	<b>1,63%</b>	98,37%
<b>1962</b>	<b>1,85%</b>	98,15%
<b>1964</b>	<b>1,83%</b>	98,17%
<b>1966</b>	<b>1,82%</b>	98,18%
<b>1968</b>	<b>1,77%</b>	98,23%
<b>1971</b>	<b>1,42%</b>	98,58%
<b>1974</b>	<b>2,47%</b>	97,53%
<b>1977</b>	<b>1,69%</b>	98,31%
<b>1980</b>	<b>2,30%</b>	97,70%
<b>1983</b>	<b>2,84%</b>	97,16%
<b>1986</b>	<b>2,82%</b>	97,16%
<b>1989</b>	<b>3,11%</b>	96,89%
<b>1992</b>	<b>4,98%</b>	95,02%
<b>1995</b>	<b>5,60%</b>	94,40%
<b>1998</b>	<b>5,60%</b>	94,40%
<b>2001</b>	<b>10,60%</b>	89,40%
<b>2004</b>	<b>16,90%</b>	83,10%
<b>2008</b>	<b>21,87%</b>	78,13%

The reforms approved in 2000 profoundly modified the rules of the French political life and they finally allowed women to participate in a more egalitarian way to a “game” in which men always had almost the monopoly<sup>19</sup>. Surely, the sharing of the political responsibilities between the sexes is still far from being achieved. However, the reform started a true process of change and currently, nothing or no one seems to be able to stop it.

## Conclusions

While French women had to wait the Liberation to see recognised their juridical equality with men in the political sphere, their presence among the elected has persisted to be feeble for the following fifty years. It has been necessary to admit the need to impose parity in the electoral lists by law, by inscribing parity among the constitutional principles, as an instrument aimed to protect the interests of *all*, not only those of women as the under-represented gender. Despite all its inadequacies, even serious, the law 2000-493 has started an inexorable process of feminization of the *élites*. With parity, a new phase of the democratic history of France has been written: the public opinion and even the elected seem to be persuaded that women will re-invent politics, by bringing a new sight. The law on parity in France must be read in the context of the need to re-new politics, to find, for governments, new effective answers to the crisis of representation that has been affecting politics for the last two decades.

The public opinion has always been favourable to introduce some corrective mechanisms, especially those which aim to increase the chances of equal participation to the electoral competitions. The decreasing trust of citizens, the more and more growing rate of electoral turn-out are serious signs of the disaffection towards the political élite. To fight this phenomenon, measures to promote a growing participation of citizens in the decision-making process and to question parties’ privileges should be improved. However, it is important to remember that the concept of parity goes beyond the political sphere and it represents only a starting point from which to keep the debate on gender equality actual across all the domains (social, economic, etc...).

## Notes

- [1] Sineau, M., *Profession femme politique*, Presse de Sciences Po, Paris, 2001, p. 1.
- [2] Perrot, M., *En un si long combat*, *Le Monde*, August 31, 1995.
- [3] Tricot, B., *Mémoires*, Quai voltaire, Paris, 1994, p. 213.
- [4] Sineau, M., *Profession femme politique*, Presse de Sciences Po, Paris, 2001, p. 19.
- [5] Perrot, M., *Le Monde*, February 25, 1999.
- [6] *Le Monde*, October 5, 1977.
- [7] d’Harcourt, F., *La loi du clan*, *Hauts de Seine*, Plon, Paris, 1998, p. 79.
- [8] Barzach, M., Bredin, F., Cresson, E., Gisserot, H., Lalumiere, C., Neiertz, V., Pelletier, M., Roudy, Y., Tasca, C., & Veil, S., “Le Manifeste des dix pour la parité”, *L’Express*, June 6, 1996.
- [9] *Assemblée Nationale*, CRA, third session of Tuesday January 25, 2000.
- [10] Women in government were 32% in March 1998, 35,7% in July 1999 and even 39,3% in January 2000, after the appointment of Florence Parly as Secretary of State to Budget.
- [11] Jenson, Sineau, *Mitterrand et les Françaises: un rendez-vous manqué*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 1995 in Sineau, 2001, p. 178.
- [12] Sineau, M., *Profession femme politique*, Presse de Sciences Po, Paris, 2001, p. 178.
- [13] *Ibidem*.
- [14] *Marie-Claire*, April 2001.
- [15] Sineau, M., *Profession femme politique*, Presse de Sciences Po, Paris, 2001, p. 189.
- [16] According to the Constitution of 1958, in order to approve a constitutional reform, it has to be voted in the same version by the Lower House and the Senate and then ratified with a majority of 3/5 of the two Houses assembled in congress.
- [17] Since the approval of the law n. 2000-641 of July 10, 2000, the proportional system applies to *départements* which elect three or more senators, that is around 70% of the overall seats in the Upper House.

[18] EPCI: *Etablissement Public de Coopération Intercommunale*.

[19] ) Sineau, M., *Profession femme politique*, Presse de Sciences Po, Paris, 2001, p.196.

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