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The Convergence of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in France:

Analysis of Systemic Tendencies from the Perspective of Sixty Years of the Fifth Republic

Abstract: The paper deals with specific links between presidential and parliamentary elections in contemporary France. The main goal is to demonstrate that the timing of the two types of political events is a significant factor preserving the configuration of a pro-presidential majority fact as one of the possible variants of French semi-presidentialism. This raises the question of the role of both elections as instruments for controlling the process of setting up a space of political rivalry that could be perceived as optimal from the viewpoint of ruling camps. The author analyses possibilities to provide the convergence of presidential and parliamentary elections under the conditions of a seven-year presidential term as well as after its shortening to five years in 2000. Hence, of particular importance is the impact of some mechanisms used in this field on the institutional logic of the French political system. Specific application of constitutional tools and some normative changes introduced in previous years cause the extent of the aforementioned control to be now much greater than in the first decades of the Fifth Republic. Looking at the convergence of both types of elections from the perspective of the evolution of the existing political system, the author argues that it is legitimate to divide the whole period of the Fifth Republic into three sub-periods: 1. the absence of electoral convergence (1958–1981); 2. partial electoral convergence (1981–2002); full electoral convergence (since 2002). Due to the acceptance of the pro-presidential paradigm, the latter formula is now definitely preferred and supported by legal regulations, which affects the flexibility of French semi-presidentialism (significantly reduced, but not fully eliminated, probability of cohabitation).

Keywords: *presidential elections, parliamentary elections, electoral calendar, France, Fifth Republic, semi-presidentialism*

Introductory Remarks

Irrespective of different research approaches, the French Fifth Republic's system of government is treated as a semi-presidential one (however, it should be indicated that the semi-presidentialism in France is firmly rooted in a parliamentary model)¹. There is no doubt that one of the constitutive features of semi-presidentialism is choosing the head of state by universal suffrage². Thanks to universal presidential and parliamentary elections (at least the first chamber being a nationwide representation is chosen in this way), it creates the configuration of two politically important procedures, each of which directly affects the functioning of the entire system. In a semi-presidential model, which is the main reference in this study, each of these elections affects the political profile of one of the two segments of executive power. As a consequence, there is a situation in which both elections are, at least theoretically, largely autonomous, that is independent of one another. As a comparison, a completely different situation occurs in a pure parliamentary system in which the head

¹ However, some authors reject the term “semi-presidentialism” as such. According to Marie-Anne Cohendet, the contemporary French system of government still remains only one of the forms of a parliamentary regime. It is characterised by Cohendet as a birepresentative parliamentary regime (*régime parlementaire biréprésentatif*), because the parliament and president are elected by popular vote (Cohendet, 2002, p. 3–4). A similar approach is represented by Jean-Claude Colliard, who maintains that it is better to define the Fifth Republic's system as a parliamentary regime with presidential correction (*correctif présidentiel*) than as a semi-presidential one. The cause lies in the fact that the latter is more related to rules of political game and the president's ties with political parties than with purely institutional factors (Colliard, 1978, pp. 280–281). Anyway, because of a considerably enhanced position of the head of state as well as constitutional and extra-constitutional rules creating double political responsibility of the government (to the parliament and to the president), the Fifth Republic may reasonably be treated as a semi-presidential regime. This does not discredit, however, the genesis of the system, which lies with the Gaullist idea of reformed parliamentarism. The aforementioned interpretations seem to assume that the foundation of a parliamentary model is the political responsibility of the government to the legislature, and any system that fulfils this condition can be legitimately treated as one of the forms of parliamentarism.

² It is a commonly accepted feature of this system, no matter how it is defined. Such an assumption can be found in the concept of semi-presidentialism presented by Maurice Duverger, which, according to him, the French government system became presidential only until the introduction of universal presidential elections in 1962, and previously it was a classical parliamentary system with a relatively strong presidential power (Duverger, 1974, p. 137). The same view was also expressed by Giovanni Sartori, who was of the opinion that under semi-presidentialism “the head of state (president) is elected by popular vote – either directly or indirectly – for a fixed term of office” (Sartori, 1997, p. 131). Robert Elgie, in turn, thinks that popular presidential elections should be a sufficient argument for recognizing a system of government based on a dualistic executive branch and the cabinet's responsibility to the parliament for a semi-presidential one (Elgie, 2011, pp. 22–23). This last approach to this model shows, however, that there is no fundamental difference between semi-presidentialism defined in this way and a parliamentary system with a popularly elected head of state, however according to Elgie, if there are universal presidential elections inscribed in the constitutional structure, the latter regime stops automatically to be a parliamentary one).

of state is elected by the parliament or by a special body built on the basis of the legislature (for example, a special electoral college composed not only of all parliamentarians but also of representatives of regional and local authorities). This means that the procedure applied to choose the head of state is more or less dependent on the previous decision of the electorate taken in universal parliamentary elections. This is due to the fact that the most likely candidate for the presidency is always a candidate actively supported (or at least accepted) by a given parliamentary majority.

Hence, in a parliamentary system in which the head of state is not elected by universal suffrage, the parliament exerts a decisive impact on the political composition of the executive. As for the government, this influence is direct and, in the case of the president – direct or indirect (in the latter case, when the head of state is chosen not by the legislature itself but by a special electoral college). The application of universal presidential elections results in the lack of parliamentary control of this type over the presidency. Although the latter situation may take place in every system of government, it seems that in a semi-presidential model this has the most far-reaching political consequences. This is related to the fact that in this regime the president cannot be a figurehead³, but the executive power still remains dualistic. What should be highlighted is that semi-presidentialism fulfils both these conditions, while the other two basic systems of government – presidentialism and parliamentarianism – meet only one of them. The former regime assumes a powerful presidency but the executive power is monistic, while the latter is based on the executive composed of the president and the cabinet but the position of the head of state is usually considerably limited⁴. What is particularly important is that a semi-presidential model presupposing the existence of two executive bodies with similar political potential assumes not only the independence of presidential and parliamentary elections, but also their relative equality. As Olivier Duhamel and Guillaume Tusseau noted, the specificity of the French system lies in the dualism of two governmental elections (*la dualité des élections gouvernementales*), which means that both have a significant impact on the existence of the government (Duhamel and Tusseau, 2013,

³ For this reason, the definition given by Elgie seems to be too liberal. Even if presidential powers are not taken into consideration while defining semi-presidentialism, the question of political responsibility of the cabinet should not be neglected. distinguishing feature of a semi-presidential model should be the assumption that there exists double governmental responsibility, that is the cabinet is politically responsible both to the parliament and to the head of state (it may be dismissed by the two organs independently), however in the latter case it does not have to be anchored in constitutional provisions, but it may also result from well-established political practice. It is the French case that may serve as the best example of such a partially constitutionalized formula of double political responsibility of the cabinet.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that in the case of a presidential model monism of the executive branch (based on strong presidential authority as well as on ministers which are politically subordinated solely to the head of state) results in the fact that parliamentary elections do not influence its political composition in any way. This proves a specific feature of presidentialism that is noticeable against the background of both semi-presidential and parliamentary systems.

p. 436). Under such conditions, the two political events provide strong legitimacy to govern. This can bring far differentiated political effects. When presidential and parliamentary elections bring similar political outcomes, the configuration of a pro-presidential majority fact (*fait majoritaire*) emerges, that is the situation where the government has stable majority in the National Assembly, and the president comes from the same political camp. This means convergence of the parliamentary majority and the so-called presidential majority (*majorité présidentielle*) built around voters that supported the incumbent head of state in the last presidential election (Gohin, 2013, pp. 604–608). Otherwise, the phenomenon of cohabitation occurs⁵. In the case of the Fifth Republic of France, these political configurations have become two contradictory constitutional variants, on the basis of which the French political system may function. The particular political significance of both elections leads to the fact that the timing in which they are held can significantly influence the entire political scene. Thus, it can be argued that presidential and parliamentary elections under the Fifth Republic have become a tool for achieving precise political effects.

In the first four decades of the Fifth Republic, the head of state was elected for a term that was two years longer than the term of office of the first chamber. However, the seven-year presidential mandate began to be perceived as too long, and the strong position of the president was an argument for more frequent democratic control of the person occupying that office. On the other hand, the constitutional amendment of 2000 introducing a five-year presidential term was – as Jean-Éric Gicquel points out – marked by an anti-cohabitation way of thinking (*une philosophie anti-cohabitationniste*) (Gicquel, 2009, pp. 306–307). The modification was thus intended, inter alia, to consolidate the configuration of a pro-presidential majority fact⁶. Such a result can be ensured by their partial or full convergence

⁵ There is no single way of defining *fait majoritaire* in French literature. Gohin treats the majority fact as the opposite of cohabitation in which the president does not come from the political camp created by the parliamentary majority. In this context, Duhamel and Tusseau use the term “presidential fact” (*fait présidentiel*) (Duhamel and Tusseau, 2013, pp. 434–435). In turn, Jean Gicquel and Jean-Éric Gicquel believe that the majority fact means that a stable majority in the National Assembly is at the disposal of the executive, which may be the president or prime minister, depending on the existing political configuration. Thus, the majority fact understood in this way does not interfere with the phenomenon of cohabitation (Gicquel and Gicquel, 2015, p. 511).

⁶ It should be noted that similar proposals of constitutional amendments were formulated in previous decades of the Fifth Republic but did not come into force until the reform of 2000. Various systemic factors were then considered. It deserves to be stressed that the initiative formulated in 1969 by Alexandre Sanguinetti, a Gaullist deputy, aimed at introducing a five-year presidential term, but it was not intended to link presidential and parliamentary elections. It was argued that the disruption of synergy between them could still be caused by dissolution of the parliament (Bigaut, 2000, pp. 89–90). As it turns out, the presidential power to dissolve the legislature was then perceived as a serious systemic obstacle, and not as a chance to restore a pro-presidential majority fact. It should be borne in mind, however, that the proposal was formulated long before the lasting domination of centre-right parties was cut short due to the first election defeat in 1981.

(when both elections are carried out one after the other in a short period of time). The aforementioned synergy may result solely from political actions or be subject to special legal regulations. Both dimensions of electoral convergence can also complement each other. The political and legal component of this original systemic phenomenon remains directly related to the length of the presidential term. Its shortening from seven to five years in 2000 can be considered as an important caesura. It can be argued that before the adoption of the appropriate constitutional amendment, strictly political strategies mattered (the dissolution of the National Assembly unrelated to conflicts between the government and the parliament, where the head of state may act as an arbitrator). Two cases of dissolution in the 1980s (1981 and 1988) shows that this tool can be used to choose the majority supporting the president who comes from the opposition political camp, that is, to prevent a conflict that does not exist yet (Devedeix-Margueritat, 2001, pp. 60–61).

After adopting constitutional and statutory modifications of 2000–2001 presidential and parliamentary elections started to be held automatically in close intervals. However, the electoral convergence understood in this way cannot be treated in the same way as conducting presidential and parliamentary elections at exactly the same time, which is the case of typical presidential systems. First of all, the sequence, and not simultaneity, of the French elections is of fundamental significance. The result of presidential elections is not without effect on the result of parliamentary ones, although of course it does not guarantee the choice of the same political option. Secondly, in the case of semi-presidentialism (in which the president may have the prime minister as a political opponent) a stable pro-presidential parliamentary majority is much more important for the head of state than in a presidential model (Lauvaux, 2002, pp. 3–8). According to Guy Carcassonne and Marc Guillaume, parliamentary elections give real power, whereas the victory in presidential ones only creates the basis for it (in their view, this should be regarded as an argument for a parliamentary, and not presidential or even semi-presidential profile of the Fifth Republic) (Carcassonne and Guillaume, 2016, p. 62). Such circumstances constitute one of the fundamental differences between the so-called presidentialist political practice of the Fifth Republic and institutional mechanisms of a typical presidential model. The former must in every case be built on the majority in the National Assembly, which emerges after the parliamentary elections. Hence, “presidentialism” in the context of both systems means something completely different and is achieved by other means. The convergence of both elections in the French semi-presidential regime can be treated as one of such instruments.

The above-described research assumptions affect the structure of the paper and its methodological aspects. After presenting general comments on the role and specifics of elections within the French semi-presidentialism, further four parts of the paper relate to some particular features of pro-presidential approach to the 1958 Constitution and include a more detailed analysis of the sixty-year history of the Fifth Republic perceived from the point of view of connections between presidential and parliamentary elections. The distinction of some sub-periods in the functioning of the current regime assumes that there have

been three consecutive formulas applied in political practice: 1) full independence of both elections (1958–1981); 2) partial convergence of both elections due to presidential decisions taken depending on the political situation (1981–2002); 3) full electoral convergence provided by deliberately adopted normative changes (since 2002). From the methodological point of view, main reference points in this study are both the constitutional structure of the system of government and some relevant mechanisms applied in practice to ensure precisely determined political effects. In general, the tendency to link both presidential and parliamentary elections should be seen through the prism of specific institutional engineering. Thus, in the analysis of the indicated periods particular emphasis is placed on the dates of both types of elections and the time which elapses between them. This creates the basis for discussing the scale of the electoral arrhythmia, various factors that may contribute to its emergence, as well as tools used to eliminate this phenomenon in recent decades.

The Pro-Presidential Interpretation of the 1958 Constitution as the Background of the Phenomenon of Electoral Convergence

As indicated above, the specific feature of the constitutional system of the Fifth Republic is that the Constitution of 4 October, 1958 (*Constitution du 4 octobre 1958*), which lies at its basis, has turned out to be a very flexible legal act. Such flexibility means susceptibility to different possible interpretations of its fundamental provisions concerning relationships within the dualistic executive branch and the latter's links with the parliament as a body that provides political support to the government⁷. It should be borne in mind that the regime defined by the 1958 Constitution, although today it is referred to as a semi-presidential one, remains firmly anchored in a highly rationalised parliamentary model in which the role of the president lies more in political arbitration than in real leadership marginalising the cabinet and the prime minister as its chief. This approach to the appropriate constitutional regulations can be called pro-parliamentary, because it emphasizes significance of fundamental institutional mechanisms based on a parliamentary model. The most important component of such an interpretation is the government's political responsibility to the parliament and the rejection of the possibility for the head of state to dismiss the government on the president's own initiative and without taking into consideration the prime minister's point of view. This assumption is fully confirmed in Article 8 of the Constitution, but the political practice fixed under subsequent years of the Fifth Republic have gone in a completely different direction (which, however, does not apply to periods of cohabitation) (Avril, 1997, p. 84).

⁷ As Martin Carrier pointed out, the institutions of the Fifth Republic were very flexible, reacting to external factors, although important formal changes in the legal order were not – with a few exceptions – carried out (Carrier, 2016, p. 22).

In turn, the pro-presidential interpretation of the constitutional order presupposes that there is a hierarchy within the executive branch which consists in subordinating the government to the head of state⁸. The recognition of such a role of the cabinet means that the body bears political responsibility before the president, although this approach is not sufficiently supported by the 1958 Constitution. Hence, the pro-presidential political practice has led to the formation of double responsibility, which is still not formally regulated (solely the one before the parliament has been foreseen in the Constitution). This is the reason why under conditions of a majority fact, the actual position of the head of state seems to be much stronger than it results from the relevant constitutional provisions. Only the occurrence of cohabitation may be treated as at least partial return to the 1958 Constitution perceived through the prism of its letter, and not of its hardly definable spirit. The consequence of this pro-parliamentary perspective is even the conclusion that under political homogeneity of the executive power (outside cohabitation), constitutional regulations concerning the structure of the adopted system of government are not observed (Cohendet, 1999, pp. 33–57).

The mechanisms underlying the evidently pro-presidential interpretation of the Constitution have been perpetuated over time, and cohabitation understood as forced abandonment of such a pro-presidential approach can only be regarded as an exception that confirms the rule. From today's point of view, it can be said that the paradigm of presidentialism remains deeply rooted in the Fifth Republic (it started to be applied in practice at the beginning of the 60. whereas the configuration of politically inhomogeneous executive power emerged only in 1986, thus over a quarter of a century after the adoption of the 1958 Constitution). The disclosure of the two political situations indicated above as well as of the paradigms that provided their constitutional justification cannot, therefore, lead to the conclusion that both are preferred or rejected to the same extent. The variant considered the most effective is the structure of a pro-presidential majority fact, while cohabitation seems to be perceived as a political and institutional scheme possessing much more disadvantages than advantages. After the period of frequent phases of cohabitation in the 1980s and 1990s (1986–1988, 1993–1995, 1997–2002) it became obvious that maintaining the formula of presidential domination, and consequently also preferring the pro-presidential interpretation of the Constitution, required certain constitutional and even statutory changes, such as shortening the presidential mandate from seven to five years and reversing the electoral calendar (presidential elections were to take place before parliamentary ones, and never directly after them). Due to the dissolution of the parliament by President Jacques Chirac in 1997, the convergence of both elections was to appear exactly five years later, but the order in

⁸ Such a concept of relations within the executive was presented by President de Gaulle during a press conference of January 31, 1964, when he pointed to the dependence of the government on the president, indicating that the head of state alone can decide on the cabinet's further existence. In this way, he questioned his own opinion formulated while working on the 1958 Constitution (Debré, 1974, pp. 275–277).

which they were to take place would be in contradiction with pro-presidential mechanisms of the functioning of the Fifth Republic (Lauvaux, 2002, p. 89). In other words, a constant relationship was to be established between the two elections, so that the majority of voters participating in them could thus confirm their attachment to a newly elected president, just as they did before the first cohabitation took place (Hamon and Troper, 2005, p. 581).

All in all, the above-indicated reforms of 2000–2001 were intended to maintain the enhanced political position of the head of state within the French semi-presidential regime. This was supposed to cause the neutralisation of those components of the system of government that are taken from a parliamentary model, and which were revealed most strongly in the conditions of cohabitation. It may be said that the French concept of presidentialism implemented in practice, and not guaranteed in the text of the Constitution, assumes that the presidential election is the main axis of the political division between two separate camps, on the basis of which the parliamentary elections are carried out (Chantebout, 2004, p. 200). Such adaptation of institutional mechanisms to expected political outcomes can be seen through the prism of the phenomenon of specific constitutional engineering (Jakubiak, 2016, pp. 424–432). In this way, the risk of another period of cohabitation has been clearly minimised, though due to the preservation of a semi-presidential system and the duality of the executive power consisting of two strong segments, such a scenario cannot be completely ruled out. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that from today's perspective cohabitation is regarded as a systemic anomaly. This in turn means that some mechanisms of the aforementioned constitutional engineering severely limit the exceptional flexibility of the current system of government. Hence, a pro-presidential majority fact and cohabitation cannot be treated as two equal variants of the practice of the Fifth Republic. Simply the former is now much more preferred than the latter.

The Absence of Electoral Convergence under the Configuration of a Pro-Presidential Majority Fact before 1981

Before the presidential term was shortened to five years in 2000, presidential and parliamentary elections had been independent of each other. This means that they were not a deliberately designed series of two elections, conducted either jointly or in succession. It is worth noting that until 1981, presidential and parliamentary elections never took place in the same year (not counting the ones held at the threshold of the Fifth Republic). The former took place in 1958 (the head of state was then elected by a special electoral college composed of about 80,000 electors), 1965, 1969, 1974, and the latter in 1958, 1962, 1967, 1968, 1973, 1978 (Bréchon, 2003, p. 241). Apart from the elections organised at the beginning of the Fifth Republic, all parliamentary elections listed above were held in the course of ongoing presidential terms, thus not immediately after the head of state was chosen (interestingly, the 1958 presidential elections were held four weeks after the parliamentary ones). After 1958 the phases between presidential and parliamentary elections were of varying length

and ranged from eleven months to nearly four years which proved that the periodically repeating schema did not actually exist (Duhamel, 2000, pp. 31–35).

It should be mentioned that the timing of elections resulting from the constitutional term of office was then disturbed several times. The causes were the dissolution of parliament (1962 and 1968), the resignation of the president (1969) and the death of the head of state during the presidential term (1974) (Lavroff, 1999, pp. 322, 324, 359, 363). Even the frequent disruption of the constant rhythm of presidential elections (every seven years) and parliamentary ones (every five years) did not contribute, however, to ensuring their convergence understood as conducting the latter directly after the former. Incidentally, mechanisms based on popular voting were applied that way in 1962. In this case, however, parliamentary elections were not preceded by presidential ones but by a referendum on introducing universal elections of the head of state (initiated by President de Gaulle)⁹.

Table 1. Presidential and parliamentary elections in France 1958–1981

Date of elections	Time elapsed between consecutive elections
1. November 23 th and 30 th , 1958 (parliamentary)	-
2. December 21 th , 1958 (presidential)	28 days
3. November 18 th and 25 th , 1962 (parliamentary)	3 years, 10 months, 28 days
4. December 5 th and 19 th , 1965 (presidential)	3 years, 10 days
5. March, 5 th and 12 th , 1967 (parliamentary)	1 year, 2 months, 17 days
6. June 23 rd and 30 th , 1968 (parliamentary)	1 year, 3 months, 11 days
7. June 1 st and 15 th , 1969 (presidential)	11 months, 1 day
8. March 4 th and 11 th , 1973 (parliamentary)	3 years, 8 months, 19 days
9. May 5 th and 19 th , 1974 (presidential)	1 year, 1 month, 25 days
10. March 12 th and 19 th , 1978 (parliamentary)	3 years, 9 months, 24 days
11. April 26 th and May 10 th , 1981 (presidential)	3 years, 1 month, 7 days

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Duhamel, 2000, pp. 31–35; Bréchon, 2003, p. 241.

It deserves to be emphasized that in the period preceding the first electoral victory of the left (1981), the configuration of a pro-presidential majority fact persisted without the need for any corrective mechanisms to ensure the convergence of both types of elections. The parliamentary ones held in the 1960s and 1970s always brought victories of a political camp whose main component was the Gaullist party (Pactet and Mélin-Soucramanien, 2007, p. 405). Under such conditions, the dissolution of the National Assembly to carry out early

⁹ The 1962 early parliamentary election resulted from the dissolution of parliament by President de Gaulle, who decided to take such a step because of the adoption of a motion of censure against the government headed by Georges Pompidou. The referendum conducted in the meantime (formally initiated by the government who was therefore overthrown by the passing of the vote of no confidence) gave support to the presidential option, constituting a kind of trampoline used during the aforementioned parliamentary elections by the camp built around the then head of state (Jakubiak, 2012, pp. 237–241; Debbasch et al., 1988, pp. 30–31).

legislative elections immediately after presidential ones would have had no justification. The absence of the aforementioned synergy cannot, however, lead to the conclusion that during this period such political events did not play specific functions inscribed in the logic of the pro-presidential interpretation of the 1958 Constitution. What should be highlighted is that after 1962, the paradigm of presidentialism was influenced by important political effects of the appropriate electoral procedures. They generally served to uphold the pro-presidential approach to existing political institutions implemented under the configuration of a majority fact supporting the entire executive branch. Taking into consideration the whole period under discussion, it can be stated that the importance of presidential elections for the structure of the French party system grew significantly. This is due to the fact that they are carried out in two rounds. The second one, with only the two candidates obtaining the highest support in the first round, contributes to the polarisation of the political scene, which is then reflected at the level of the National Assembly. Hence, such variables as the existence, structure and durability of major political camps, which determine the arena of party rivalry, depend largely on specific results of presidential elections (Chantebout, 1992, pp. 56–57; Cole, 2003, pp. 12–13). Moreover, the election of the head of state by popular vote enabled the reorganization of the most important political forces behind party leaders participating in them, as demonstrated by the first such elections of 1965 (Bréchon and Denni, 2013, p. 26). All in all, choosing the head of the state by popular vote caused presidential majorities (revealed and consolidated thanks to such a procedure) to affect the political dimension of newly-created configurations in the legislature, favouring the formula of a long-term pro-presidential majority fact as one of the two possible political variants under the Fifth Republic (Lavroff, 1999, pp. 942–943).

On the other hand, under the conditions of presidential domination before 1981, the position of the ruling camp was so stabilised that even parliamentary elections held after a long time that had elapsed since presidential ones did not bring the opposition's victory. This happened for the first time only in 1986 – after 28 years of the Fifth Republic – and marked the beginning of the first period of cohabitation (Lavroff, 1999, pp. 378–384). It is worth noting, however, that the first delegitimation of the political camp that had been in power since the beginning of the Fifth Republic was the result of the electoral victory of François Mitterrand five years earlier, in 1981. What should be stressed is that this took place during presidential elections, not parliamentary ones. Before 1981, such a weakening of the ruling party occurred only once, in the referendum regarding the reform of the Senate conducted at the initiative of President de Gaulle in 1969. Following its disadvantageous outcomes, the head of state resigned, which resulted in early presidential elections (Chevalier et al., 2007, pp. 150–160; Garrigues, 2008, pp. 23–25). This, however, did not affect the political composition existing in the National Assembly. According to the then electoral calendar, next parliamentary elections were to be held only in 1973, a year before another universal vote on the presidency. In the light of the above, there is no doubt that under such circumstances the absence of the electoral convergence was not an obstacle in maintaining

a pro-presidential majority fact as the most beneficial variant (from the point of view of the ruling camp regardless of its political profile) of the French political system.

Partial Convergence of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in the Conditions of High Electoral Volatility (1981–2001)

It was only in 1981 that a specific constitutional mechanism was intentionally used to allow both types of elections to be carried out within a relatively short space of time. The cause lay in the fact that in the early 1980s the then opposition candidate, François Mitterrand, won presidential elections. Under the period of the Fifth Republic, such a situation had not happened before¹⁰. As a result, the newly-elected president decided to conduct early elections to the National Assembly. Thanks to the dissolution of the first chamber, it was possible to obtain additional benefits from the victory of the socialist candidate in the presidential elections held a few weeks earlier. The anticipated effect of the application of Article 12 of the Constitution was a fundamental change in the political configuration of the National Assembly. It should be remembered that the pro-government and pro-presidential parliamentary majority existing in both chambers before the 1981 double elections provided the centre-right camp with a particularly favourable formula of a majority fact. The latter effect could be achieved only in the 1970s, when the centrist formations, which were not politically connected with the Gaullist camp, ceased to dominate in the Senate. As a consequence, the French second chamber of that time began to provide the entire executive branch with stable and predictable support, which was comparable to that existing in the first chamber, and even the political composition of the Senate was somewhat more favourable from the presidential point of view (Mastias, 1999, pp. 170–171). For this reason, the aforementioned dissolution of the National Assembly could be treated as an attempt to increase, at least partially, the political resources of the newly elected head of state (it should be added that due to the inability to dissolve the second chamber and the electoral procedures used, the Senate was out of reach)¹¹. The 1981 triumph of the Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*) showed

¹⁰ Although in 1974 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a candidate from outside the Gaullist camp, defeated the left-wing candidate François Mitterrand in the second round and became a new president of the Republic, his own political party had belonged to the presidential majority existing under the presidency of Georges Pompidou (1969–1974). This meant that no cohabitation began in 1974 and the pro-presidential majority fact continued. However, the first government of that time was headed by Jacques Chirac who was the then leader of the Gaullist political formation (Debbasch et al., 1988, pp. 39–46). Thus, both political leaders did not represent the same segment of the centre-right ruling camp.

¹¹ Such an action cannot be regarded as a manifestation of political arbitration of the president intervening only if there is a dysfunctional political conflict which he himself is not a party to. In the French case, the head of state undoubtedly lacked political neutrality or at least a distance to other authorities. It deserves to be stressed that the latter feature underlies not a typical parliamentary model based on

that the maverick decision taken by President Mitterrand proved successful. However, it does not change the fact that the intentional convergence of both elections did not become a permanent political phenomenon. The reason for this was that terms of office of the head of state and of the National Assembly did not overlap. Almost simultaneous 1981 presidential and parliamentary elections meant that the next elections to the first chamber were to take place two years before the end of the term of office of the then incumbent head of state (or even earlier – if the National Assembly had been previously dissolved). The parliamentary elections of 1986 and 1993 proved that this resulted in a significant weakening of the adopted vision of presidency. The head of state was then forced to operate for a few years under difficult conditions of cohabitation.

Table 2. Presidential and parliamentary elections in France 1981–2002

Date of elections	Time elapsed between consecutive elections
1. April 26 th and May 10 th , 1981 (presidential)	-
2. June 14 th and 21 st , 1981 (parliamentary)	1 month, 4 days
3. March 16 th , 1986 (parliamentary)	4 years, 8 months, 25 days
4. April 24 th and May 8 th , 1988 (presidential)	2 years, 1 month, 8 days
5. June 5 th and 12 th , 1988 (parliamentary)	28 days
6. March 21 st and 28 th , 1993 (parliamentary)	4 years, 9 months, 9 days
7. April 23 rd and May 7 th , 1995 (presidential)	2 years, 26 days
8. May 25 th and June 1 st , 1997 (parliamentary)	2 years, 18 days
9. April 21 st and May 5 th , 2002 (presidential)	4 years, 10 months, 20 days

Source: Author's elaboration based on Duhamel, 2000, pp. 31–35; Bréchon, 2003, p. 242.

However, the above-described practice of dissolving the legislature immediately after the presidential elections was used only in the 1980s. It was at that time that the National Assembly was dissolved twice to bring together the two elections, the expected consequence of which was to be the political identity of the presidential majority and the parliamentary one (Elgie, 1993, p. 11). In the 1990s, the first chamber was dissolved only once. Although, like in the two previous cases, the goal was to create such a parliamentary majority that would foster the head of state, the electoral convergence was out of the question. This was due to the fact that President Chirac applied Article 12 of the Constitution only at the end of the second year of his presidential term, and not at its very beginning. Unlike in 1981 and 1988, after the 1995 presidential elections, the dissolution of the National Assembly was not a necessary condition for restoring the political identity of the head of state and the majority in the first chamber. Such an effect did not have to be caused by dissolution of the legislature, because it arose from the 1995 victory of Jacques Chirac who was presented as a candidate of the camp controlling the then centre-right parliamentary majority. Therefore, the application of the

neutralised presidency, but its most far-reaching pro-presidential modifications which cause the head of state to be a relevant political actor striving to pursue his own political interests (Jakubiak, 2013, pp. 62–64).

aforementioned corrective mechanism to maintain and consolidate the same political profile of presidential and parliamentary majorities would be subject to a particular risk without any satisfactory benefits. Hence, it is not surprising that the parliament was dissolved not in 1995, but only in 1997, that is one year before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1998. The step taken by President Chirac was then perceived as a preventive measure that would hinder the creation of an electoral coalition of left-wing parties (under the leadership of the Socialist Party headed by Lionel Jospin) known as the plural left (*gauche plurielle*) (Hanley, 2003, pp. 78–81). However, such expectations turned out to be completely wrong, and the 1997 dissolution led to another period of cohabitation, this time lasting five years (until the end of the seven-year presidential term) (Bellon, 2008, pp. 54–56).

It should also be noted that the electoral convergence was missing in the first half of the 1990s. As a result of the 1988 dissolution of the legislature by a re-elected head of state, parliamentary elections took place after five years, and subsequent presidential ones only two years later. This meant a similar scenario to that known from the years 1986–1988 when the first cohabitation occurred. Hence, the synergy of elections in the analysed period consisted primarily in particular influence exerted by a newly-elected (or re-elected) president. Anyway, such partial electoral convergence (only in the initial phase of this period) contributed to the reduction of the pre-1981 arrhythmia. It is due to the fact that in the remaining cases nationwide elections (presidential or parliamentary) took place every five or two years, which lasted until 2002 (Duhamel, 2000, p. 34). The scenario of “five years of a majority fact, followed by two years of cohabitation” was repeated in the same form during Mitterrand’s second term of office, and during Chirac’s first term it underwent a certain modification taking the form of “two years of a majority fact, followed by five years of cohabitation”. On the other hand, due to quite high electoral volatility of that time that led to frequent changes in the ruling parties (each parliamentary election of 1981–2002 resulted in the fact that the camp in power went to the opposition), the possibility of consolidating a pro-presidential majority fact turned out to be very limited. During these two decades, however, there were no other factors than the dissolution of the legislature that would shorten presidential or parliamentary terms. Compared to the previous period, it was a significant difference.

Full Convergence of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections after Shortening the Term of the Head of State to Five Years (Since 2002)

Another type of convergence of presidential and parliamentary elections took place in 2002. Because of 1997 dissolution of the first chamber, both political events were to occur in the same year. In this context, however, particular attention should be paid to the organic law of May 15, 2001 that changed the date of elections to the National Assembly (*Loi organique no 2001–419 du 15 mai 2001 modifiant la date d’expiration des pouvoirs de l’Assemblée nationale*). Without adopting the legal act, the 2002 parliamentary elections would have been held before the presidential ones scheduled for the same year. The reason lay in the

aforementioned dissolution of parliament by President Chirac in 1997. Considering the dominant pro-presidential paradigm and the need to maintain this approach to the 1958 Constitution, it is not surprising that such a situation would have been unacceptable. It was assumed that the reverse order of both elections would contribute to the weakening of the presidency based not only on the Constitution itself, but above all on its pro-presidential interpretation. In the light of this view, the lack of reaction to the anticipated political effects of the 1997 dissolution could be regarded as a *de facto* rejection, or at least a significant undermining of the whole Gaullist constitutional project. It is due to the fact that, the head of state would have then much less influence on the appointment of the head of government, and thus on the functioning of the executive branch (Philip, 2008, p. 425). It can be assumed that in such conditions voters participating in presidential elections would be guided by the results of earlier parliamentary ones. The latter elections would shape the political profile of the presidency, which would lower the actual position of the head of state. It cannot be ruled out that the president would only become a member of the ruling camp, whose real leader would be the prime minister (if there were no cohabitation).

Again, as far as the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections are concerned, their convergence and the planned electoral order resulted directly from previously adopted modifications, and not from the application of Article 12 of the 1958 Constitution as a special tool for correcting the electoral calendar to achieve concrete political goals. Of key significance was then the introduction of a five-year term of the head of state. The constitutional act was passed in the referendum held on September 24, 2000 (*Loi constitutionnelle no 2000-964 du 2 octobre 2000 relative à la durée du mandat du Président de la République*). This has practically removed the problem of possible cohabitation in the last two years of the presidency that could happen if opposition parties to the head of state won parliamentary elections after five years of holding the presidential office, so when the president – unlike directly after presidential elections – has no political position to undermine voters' decision. Although the dissolution of the National Assembly immediately after parliamentary elections which do not result from earlier dissolution of this body (at least one year must elapse from the previous elections, so that the parliament can be dissolved again) is not prohibited by the Constitution, but it would have no rational justification from the point of view of democratic rivalry and could be treated as politically unacceptable.

From today's perspective, it can be stated that the specific electoral convergence has already become a relatively permanent and well-established political phenomenon, which is confirmed by presidential and parliamentary elections carried out in the years 2002, 2007, 2012 and 2017 (the latter conducted always a few weeks after the former). This meant the elimination of the specific electoral arrhythmia existing in France before the introduction of the five-year term of office of the head of state (Duhamel and Tusseau, 2013, pp. 561–562). What seems to be particularly important is that this rhythm of both elections held every five years since 2002 has not been disturbed in any way so far. The factors that could possibly cause, at least for some time, such an effect are resignation, dismissal or death of the

incumbent president (disruption of the five-year term of the head of state), as well as the dissolution of the National Assembly (disruption of the five-year term of the first chamber) (Cohendet, 2002, pp. 29). On the other hand, the latter tool can also be used as a means of restoring the electoral synergy after an early termination of the five-year presidential term, which suggests that the entire system still retains the ability to return to its pro-presidential structure (none of the parliamentary elections held until immediately after the presidential election have led to cohabitation, although such a scenario is not entirely unlikely). In this way, the disrupted convergence of both elections could easily be restored, and the effects of such a step would also be visible in the further future (repeating such a sequence of presidential and parliamentary elections after exactly five years).

Table 3. Presidential and parliamentary elections in France since 2002

Date of elections	Time elapsed between consecutive elections
1. April 21 st and May 5 th , 2002 (presidential)	-
2. June 9 th and 16 th , 2002 (parliamentary)	1 month, 4 days
3. April 22 nd and May 6 th , 2007 (presidential)	4 years, 10 months, 6 days
4. June 10 th and 17 th , 2007 (parliamentary)	1 month, 4 days
5. April 22 nd and May 6 th , 2012 (presidential)	4 years, 10 months, 5 days
6. June 10 th and 17 th , 2012 (parliamentary)	1 month, 4 days
7. April 23 rd and May 7 th , 2017 (presidential)	4 years, 10 months, 6 days
8. June 11 th and 18 th , 2017 (parliamentary)	1 month, 4 days

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Duhamel, 2000, pp. 31–35; *Les élections en France. Les résultats*. Ministère de l’Intérieur. Retrieved from: <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats>.

Thus, analysing presidential and parliamentary elections conducted in the first two decades of the 21st century, special attention should be paid to the effects of choosing a particular presidential candidate for the later political composition of the first chamber. Chirac’s victory in 2002 was confirmed by the success of the Gaullist party in the parliamentary elections held a few weeks later. It is worth emphasizing that this political formation was then known as the Union for the Presidential Majority (*Union pour la majorité présidentielle*). This was a coalition of several centre-right parties that united to create a pro-presidential political environment in the National Assembly (Agrikoliansky, 2008, pp. 106–108). After the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections, a cohesive presidential party emerged (the Union for a Popular Movement – *Union pour un mouvement populaire*), which affected the relationship between the legislative and executive centred around the head of state (Lazardeux, 2010, p. 52). Five years later, the same political formation provided parliamentary support to Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency. Both in 2002 and in 2007, strong centre-right majorities were established in the first chamber. The fundamental change of political configuration took place only in 2012, when François Hollande took the presidency, and the Socialist Party gained the most seats in the parliamentary elections conducted a few weeks later (the absolute presidential majority was then formed with the participation of smaller left-wing

groups) (Thevenon, 2016, pp. 245–255). The result of both elections was therefore a total alternation of power (both in its presidential and parliamentary dimension)¹².

In turn, the 2017 double elections can be considered exceptional because they have interrupted the rivalry between centre-right and left-wing political camps built respectively around the neo-Gaullist party which has been functioning since 2015 as the Republicans (*Les Républicains*) and the Socialist Party as the main formation of the French left. Emmanuel Macron's victory in the 2017 presidential elections has allowed for at least partial but not necessarily long-lasting reconstruction of the political area between both aforementioned party blocks¹³. Such a conclusion comes from the results of the 2017 parliamentary elections held after the presidential ones. The absolute majority of seats has been granted to the Republic Onwards! (*La République En Marche!*) – a political party founded a year earlier to support Macron as a presidential candidate. It should be mentioned that he decided to compete for the presidency independently of the Socialist Party with which he had been previously associated as a member of François Hollande's political camp (Evans and Ivaldi, 2018, pp. 79–82). The convergence of both types of election has therefore been subjected to a specific test. As it has turned out, the victory of the candidate from outside the two main political camps did not prevent the creation of a strong pro-presidential majority in the first chamber, even though the political background of the newly elected president was not established. Thus, the position of the two main parties at the parliamentary level has been significantly reduced (the Republic Onwards! took over 300 mandates in the first chamber, whereas the Republicans and the Socialist Party together – less than 150). Hence, as far as the role of the above-discussed convergence for maintaining the pro-presidential constitutional paradigm is concerned, from the perspective of the last four double presidential and parliamentary elections (2002–2017), it can be said that this electoral test was passed every time.

Conclusions

The most important institutional component thanks to which the effect of full convergence can be achieved and consolidated, is the introduction of a five-year presidential term (preceded by the introduction – almost four decades earlier – of universal presidential elections), which is the same as the term of office of the first chamber. The same can be said

¹² It is worth mentioning that the alternation of power which is only partial (as exemplified by the 1986 elections to the National Assembly) leads to the emergence of cohabitation (Quermonne, 2003, pp. 88–102). As political practice has shown, such an alternation takes place only after parliamentary elections because after presidential ones newly-elected presidents enjoy a special legitimacy to dissolve the first chamber, which creates a very high probability of choosing a pro-presidential political option in the legislature.

¹³ In the early years of the Fifth Republic, this part of the political scene was occupied by some smaller centre parties existing in the first decades of the Fifth Republic, but the process of polarisation caused them to disappear as relevant independent formations (Agrikoliansky, 2008, pp. 111–113).

about the aforementioned modification of the electoral calendar, however this reform did not require a constitutional amendment¹⁴. Other factors can be considered important but secondary. Their significance boils down to reinforcing the pro-presidential practice of exercising power, which in turn has an impact on the electoral convergence itself. From this point of view, special attention should be paid to the right of the head of state to dissolve the National Assembly being the only chamber before which the government is politically responsible. The role of this factor was particularly important before the reform of 2000. Under conditions of so-called *alternance* periods (launched in 1981) when various political camps were alternately going to the opposition or holding government posts (Quermonne, 2003, pp. 76–88; Castagnez, 2008, pp. 31–34), the dissolution of the legislature served as the basic corrective mechanism preventing the emergence of cohabitation in the aftermath of presidential elections, but after shortening the presidential term to five years, the factor in question has clearly lost its previous importance. If parliamentary elections are carried out each time immediately after presidential ones and bring the results expected by the political camp supporting the head of state, the use of the tool regulated in Article 12 of the constitution is unnecessary and even undesirable. Its most far-reaching effect could be, at most, the disruption of convergence of both elections leading to a significant increase in the risk of another period of cohabitation.

It is also difficult to overestimate the mere priority of presidential elections over parliamentary ones. In such a situation the latter may serve mainly to confirm the outcomes of the former. In accordance with the pro-presidential constitutional paradigm, the main task of the parliamentary majority in the National Assembly is thus to enable the implementation of the political programme presented by the head of state. Such priority of presidential elections was clearly visible in the period before 2000, although in this case it did not result from a deliberate change of the then electoral calendar, but from the fact that the 1981 and 1988 early parliamentary elections were ordered by the head of state enjoying fresh political legitimacy received in the elections held under universal suffrage. This means that before the changes of 2000–2001, the French system of government was not forced to function under the full independence of both elections. The dissolution of the National Assembly, although the constitutional regulation of the appropriate presidential power is very beneficial to the head of state, had, however, clearly delineated boundaries. When the president was elected for seven years, the dissolution constituted an imperfect tool to ensure a long-lasting pro-presidential majority fact. In turn, after shortening the presidential term that allows

¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that of all the constitutional changes that had been made prior to the extensive constitutional reform of 2008, only universal presidential elections (introduced in 1962 and applied for the first time in 1965) and a five-year presidential term (introduced in 2000 and applied for the first time in 2002) are recognized as modifications that have contributed significantly to the lasting pro-presidential reorientation of the regime during the Fifth Republic (Levade, 2010, pp. 231–232).

automatically created convergence of both elections, it turned out that this mechanism is no longer needed, or at least as long as none of the terms is interrupted.

In the light of the above findings, it is legitimate to conclude that the convergence of presidential and parliamentary elections has become one of the distinctive features of the Fifth Republic and a yet another instrument shaping the logic of French semi-presidentialism. Looking from this point of view, it can be stated that the Fifth Republic has undergone a significant evolution, the final stage of which seems to be the consolidation of both types of elections as specific pro-presidential instruments. Initially, there was no such convergence. After the beginning of the *alternance* periods and before 2002, such an effect was achieved only after conducting presidential elections and taking immediate decisions to dissolve the first chamber on the basis of Article 12 of the Constitution. This mechanism, however, was used in practice only in the 1980s. In the next decade, parliamentary elections were held in the middle of presidential terms (both during the second presidency of François Mitterrand and the first presidency of Jacques Chirac). The absence of electoral convergence in this period was undoubtedly the result of the then political configurations, because no relevant normative reforms were introduced. In this respect, the fundamental change took place at the beginning of the 21st century when parliamentary elections began to be carried out immediately after presidential ones. In line with expectations, the former have always ended with favourable results for political camps headed by newly elected heads of state. This in turn entailed consolidation of the formula of a pro-presidential majority fact which, against the backdrop of constant changes in political configurations taking place in the 1980s and 1990s (frequent periods of cohabitation), has become the preferred political formula. What is most important, however, is that such a construction has begun to be sustained thanks to specific legal provisions. All this leads to the conclusion that the phenomenon of artificially achieved electoral convergence (provided that presidential elections are conducted first) may be perceived as yet another factor contributing to the emergence of a highly presidentialised political environment determining the current shape of the French semi-presidentialism.

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