Objective of the course

The main objective of the course is to enable students who are unfamiliar with French politics to understand the major political shift that occurred during the last presidential campaign and to participate in political debates during their stay in France. Students will gain the intellectual tools necessary to decipher the history of French politics in the last fifty years, the voting behaviour of French voters, as well as the news coverage of French politics.

Summary

This course is dedicated to the presentation, discussion and analysis of the main stakes of French political life, with a particular focus on presidential elections. The focus of the seminar will be on developing an understanding of the main events, actors, processes and ideas that have shaped and influenced contemporary France since the birth of the current Fifth Republic in 1958. The course will first identify the main actors within French politics by the study of its institutions, its culture, its ideological debates, and its historical roots (sessions 1 to 5). The course will then undertake the presentation and analysis of recent electoral trends and the evolution of political discourse. This task will be based on the study of the most recent presidential elections (from 2002 to 2017) that will shed light on the causes and consequences of the transformation of the French party system and on current electoral trends (sessions 6 to 9). The following questions, among others, will be addressed throughout the course: What are the causes behind the spectacular rise of Emmanuel Macron and his ultimate victory? Have we entered a new political world? How might we understand the strength of the National Front in French politics?

Organization of the course

Lecture 1 – July 3: Introduction: The legacy of Gaullism and the birth of the Fifth Republic
- Power distribution in the French political system
- How do institutions work in France?
- What are the powers of the President? The Prime Minister? Parliament?

Lecture 2 – July 5: State, Republic, Nation in France
- State and ‘Statism’
- The Republic

Lecture 3 – July 8: Party politics (1) The Left
- Birth and history of the Left in France
- Contemporary evolution, strategy and transformations
- Is Macronism a Left-wing movement?

Lecture 4 – July 10: Party politics (2) The Right
- Birth and history of the Right in France
- Contemporary evolution, strategy and transformations
- Is Macronism a Right-wing movement?

Lecture 5 – July 12: Party politics (3) Radical political forces and protest groups: The National Front
- Birth and history of the extreme-Right in France
- Contemporary evolution, strategy and transformations

Lecture 6 – July 15: French electoral behaviour and political communication
- Voting patterns
How to analyse political gaps and polarisation of French politics?
What role the media play in French electoral campaigns?

Lecture 7 – July 17: Presidential elections in 2002: the candidates’ nightmare
- Why did Jean-Marie Le Pen reach the 2nd round of the election?
- Did the 21st April reshuffle the cards of party politics?
- How did the Left get over the elimination of its candidate?

Lecture 8 – July 19: From 2007 to 2012: a political renewal?
- A real shift in candidates?
- What were the topics around which these elections revolved?

Lecture 9 – July 22: A disruptive vote? What happened during the 2017 Presidential election?
- How to explain the emergence of Emmanuel Macron
- A political world torn into pieces?
- Old politics? New politics?

Requirements for course validation

1. Final exam (60%): A final 3-hour essay exam that will take place on Thursday, 25 July.
2. Class presentation (30%): By groups of 2, students will have to do a short presentation (10 minutes maximum) on a topic related to French politics. Presentations will cover recent events in French politics and different policy areas, such as the Yellow Vests protests, the ban on religious signs in public schools, the weight of environmental issues, the role of the European Union in French politics, the State of emergency, etc.
3. Course participation (10%): The participation grade takes into account class attendance, discussion on course readings and students’ active participation in class discussions.

Bibliography

Lecture 1:
- Constitution of the 5th Republic

Lecture 2:

Lecture 3:

Lecture 4:

Lecture 5:

Lecture 6:

Lecture 7:

Lecture 8:

Lecture 9:

Professor biography

Dr. Thomas Vitiello (PhD Sciences Po, MSc UvA, BA IEPG) teaches political sciences courses (French politics, understanding and measuring public opinion, the personalization of politics…) at Sciences Po and works at the consultancy and survey company Elabe. His research focuses on online Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) and the study of electoral behaviour. He was the leading researcher in the development at the CEVIPOF (Centre of Political Research of Sciences Po) of the French VAA of “La Boussole présidentielle” for the 2017 French presidential election. His research has been published in Revue Française de Science Politique, Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée, Party Politics, and the International Journal of Electronic Governance. His most recent co-authored publication is « La République En Marche: Anatomie d’un mouvement », a sociological study on LaREM’s members.