Legislative behavior in the French Senate: A new dataset from the Fifth Republic

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Abstract

This research note presents a new dataset on the French Senate. We provide demographic (1968–2017) and electoral (1983–2020) data for all Senate districts, biographical and political characteristics for all senators who served during the Fifth Republic (1959–2017), and data on roll-call votes (RCVs), individual senator's votes in relation to them, and the corresponding bill content (1996–2017). In this note, we describe the structure of our datasets, provide descriptive information on key variables, highlight temporal shifts in ideological trends in the French Senate, and discuss possible future research topics. We anticipate these data will make an important addition to the rapidly growing literature on upper chambers and legislative dynamics.

Introduction

This research note presents a new dataset on the French Senate. We provide demographic (1968–2017) and electoral (1983–2020) data for all Senate districts, biographical and political characteristics for all senators who served during the Fifth Republic (1959–2017), and data on roll-call votes (RCVs), individual senator's votes in relations to them, and the corresponding bill content (1996–2017). RCVs and data on bill content have been used extensively to study legislatures at the sub-national, national, international, and even supranational levels (Rosenthal and Voeten, 2004; McCarty, 2011; Bailey et al., 2017; Meyerrose, 2018; Sieberer et al., 2020). RCVs and data on legislators are used not only to record and track legislative output, but also to study issues surrounding party unity and leadership; legislative committee formation; parties' preferred outcomes on policy issues; and to identify and trace changes in the ideological positioning and polarization of individual legislators as well as parliamentary groups both within and across parliamentary sessions.

Our data will add to the growing body of comparative data on legislators and parliamentary sessions (Göbel and Munzert, 2021). Despite recent work on roll call voting in the French legislature (Godbout and Foucault, 2013;

Meyerrose and Watson, 2024), the only publicly available RCV dataset in French politics examines legislative voting in the National Assembly during the Fourth Republic, which ended in 1958 (Rosenthal and Voeten, 2004). Similar data for the French Senate, the country's upper legislative body, has until now been unavailable in a format suited for statistical analysis.

The French Senate —which has existed in its current form since 1958 and has powers to introduce and ratify legislation similar to those of the National Assembly, France's lower legislative house— constitutes a rich institutional setting to study questions surrounding individual and party-level dynamics. First, France's Senate is somewhat unusual in that the voting system for selecting senators varies across districts. Prior to 2000, approximately two-thirds of senators were elected via majoritarian systems, with the rest under proportional representation (PR).

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However, following a series of electoral reforms and shifts in district seat allocations, today approximately 52% of French Senate constituencies use PR electoral rules, while the rest use majoritarianism. This unique institutional design provides an excellent opportunity to test competing hypotheses regarding the impact of formal institutions on legislative behavior and party unity (Carey, 2007; Shugart et al., 2005). Furthermore, the French Senate has a long history of allowing national and EU-level parliamentarians —including senators— to concurrently hold elected local and national offices, a practice known as the "dual mandate" that is common in a number of European countries. The dual mandate is another institutional feature researchers can leverage to explore how vertical democratic linkages shape legislative behavior and outcomes.

We provide data on individual voting behavior on 3,602 RCVs taken by 844 members of the French Senate from 1996 through 2017. Additional datasets contain information on the content of these RCVs and also a range of biographical and political information on senators, their corresponding electoral constituencies, and the elections in which they compete for office. We also provide individual-level data on senators across the entire French Fifth Republic (1959–2017). Finally, we link our datasets to comparative ones on elections, political parties, and legislative bills.[1] In this letter, we describe the structure of the data, provide descriptive information on key variables, and illustrate how ideological trends in the French Senate have shifted over time. We conclude with a brief discussion of potential research agendas.

New data on the French Senate

This section and Figure 1 provide an overview of our datasets on Senate elections; characteristics of departments, which are the electoral constituency for French senators; individual senator biographical and political characteristics; dual mandates; senator-level votes on roll call votes; and the content of the bills on which senators have voted.

Senate elections

First, we provide data on French Senate elections from 1983 to 2020.[2] Senators in each electoral district —or, department— are indirectly elected by an electoral college of 150,000 local elected officials. For these elections, the French system uses both majoritarian (two-round first-past-the-post) and proportional (PR) electoral rules. Our dataset includes information on the election type, disaggregated by electoral round (in the case of departments under majoritarian rules), and the number of seats being contested in each department. It also reports how many votes each candidate received in any given electoral round, the candidate's political party, the party list on which they contested

the election, their rank on the party list, and, ultimately, whether the candidate won the election. Where available, we also provide variables linking candidates' parties to the ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2012), Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2017), and European Election Studies (Carteny et al., 2022) datasets so that users can connect our data with comparative data. Finally, for candidates that were elected, we include a unique senator identifier ("matricule") to link this dataset to the others described below.

Department demographics

Since each senator is elected to represent a department, we include detailed information on electoral-district economic variables, such as population size, the percent of the population born abroad, and the percent of immigrants. These data are from the French census and the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE)'s Estimations de Population (INSEE, 2023).

Senator characteristics

We also provide a range of biographical and political variables for senators that served between 1959 and 2017.[3]

Partisan affiliations. We scraped biographical information from the Senate website to construct indicators of senators' partisan affiliation(s). We include a variable indicating a senator's permanent ideological categorization for all observations; for senators that served from 1976 to 2017, we also provide more detailed party affiliation variables. Political groupings in the French Senate do not directly follow national-level party loyalties. Instead, senators affiliate themselves with groups, which are required to have at least 15 members (10 members since 2011).

Because senators are permitted different degrees of political group affiliation, in addition to aggregate group membership we collect data on three degrees of attachment. For each political grouping: **full membership** indicates senators agree to a full range of group rules, which vary across group; **related membership** (*rattaché au groupe*) implies senators share ideological tendencies, but are not necessarily expected to vote with the group; and **administratively attached memberships** (*apparenté au groupe*) provide ideologically disparate senators access to facilities and administrative support without requiring any ideological agreement. Figure 2 shows temporal variation in related and administratively attached membership.

Party switching is common in the French Senate, as shown in Figure 3. We therefore also report detailed information about whether senators switched parties in a given year, and, if so, when and to which party.[4]

SENATE ELECTIONS	DEPARTMENT DEMOGRAPHICS	SENATOR CHARACTERISTICS	DUAL MANDATES	VOTING BEHAVIOR	BILL CODES	BILL DESCRIPTIONS
14,454 observations corresponding to 13 department-level Senate elections from the Fifth Republic (1983-2020)	4,340 observations corresponding to 102 electoral districts (departments) (1968-2017)	19,749 observations corresponding to 1,606 Fifth Republic senators (1959-2017)	33,391 records corresponding to 797 Fifth Republic senators (1959-2017)	1,186,654 records of individual voting decisions by 844 senators on 3,602 roll call votes (1996-2017)	2,635 records for 2,635 roll call votes with French Senate and CAP codes (2006-2017)	3,602 records for 3,602 roll call votes with French and English bill descriptions (1996-2017)
20 variables	29 variables	72 variables	7 variables	7 variables	19 variables	10 variables
Election-related: election type (SMD or PR); round (for SMD); total number of seats **Candidate-related:** name; number of votes received; percent of votes received; party; party list information; electoral outcome **Identification variables:** senator ID (`matricule`); year (`year`); INSEE department code (`num_departement`) **Links to additional datasets:** ParlGov, Comparative Manifesto Project, European Election Studies	**Demographic information:** population (total and by age, gender); immigrants **Identification variables:** INSEE department code (`num_departement`); year (`year`)	**Personal and sociodemographic:** name; gender; date of birth; date of death; profession **Election-related:** election type (SMD or PR); party; election date; years in office; indicator if facing election this year **Office-related:** first and last year in Senate; nine-year term indicator; reason for end of mandate; parliamentary group, family; party switcher indicator and date **Identification variables:** senator ID (`matricule`); year (`year`); INSEE department code (`num_departement`)	**Basics:** senator name **Mandate details:** Type and geographic level of elected office **Identification variables:** senator ID (`matricule`); year (`year`)	**Basic senator characteristics:** senator name **Voting behavior:** yea, nay, abstain, or did not participate **Vote information:** parliamentary session; date of vote **Identification variables:** senator ID (`matricule`); roll call vote ID (`scrutin_number`); parliamentary session (`yearset`); year (`year`)	**Basics:** scrutin date **Content:** short and long description of bills from dossier législatif **Policy area codes:** variables for Senate coding scheme (up to 3 per scrutin); Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding (no more than 1 per scrutin) **Identification variables:** roll call vote ID (`scrutin_number`); parliamentary session (`yearset`); year (`year`)	**Basics:** scrutin date/day/month; source URL **Content:** short and long description of bills, French and English **Identification variables:** roll call vote ID (`scrutin_number`); parliamentary session (`yearset`); year (`year`)

Figure 1. Structure of datasets. Variable names are printed in courier. All other entries refer to variable content.
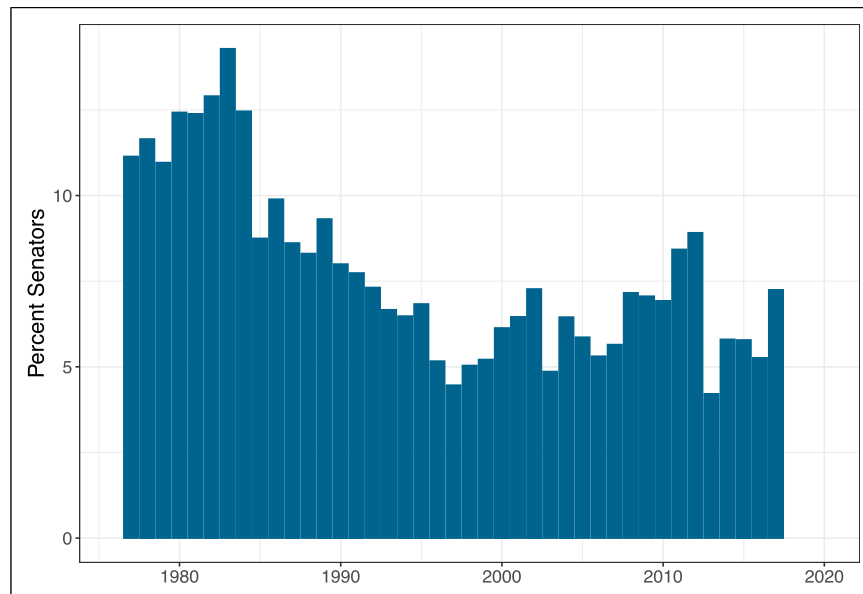

Figure 2. Related and administratively attached party memberships, 1976–2017.

Political variables. We also provide data on senators' incumbency status, term length, current legislative session, and each electoral cycle in which they participate. Prior to 2008, one-third of senators faced election every 3 years for 9-year terms. After 2008, France began shifting to 6-year terms, with half of the body facing re-election every 3 years; this process was completed in 2014. Therefore, we include variables indicating a senator's electoral series, the year a senator was elected, the years remaining in their current term, and an indicator for whether they are serving a 9year term. We also collected information on the number of seats in a given electoral district[5] and the relevant electoral rules.
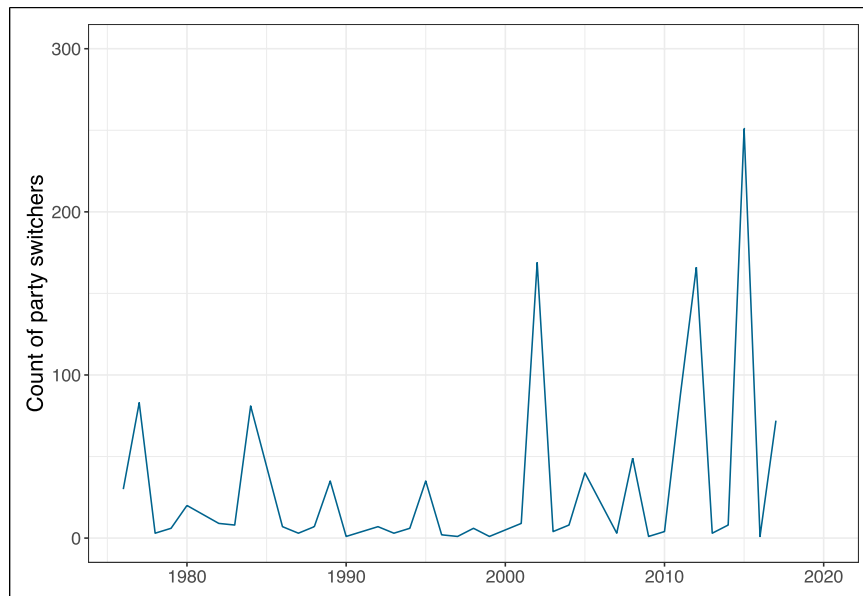
Figure 3. Party switching in the French Senate, 1976–2017.

Demographic variables. Finally, we provide each senator's basic demographic information, including birth date, sex, and professional status prior to joining the Senate. We also collect information on why any given senator's legislative mandate ended.

Dual mandates

Until 2017, senators were allowed to simultaneously serve in the upper chamber and hold a range of local offices, or dual mandates, creating a system of vertical linkages known as *cumul de mandats*. Researchers argue *cumuls* provide an important form of local access to central decision-making and that *cumulards* have a fundamental interest in representing their territorial area (Costa and Kerrouche, 2009).

Our data include information on the number, type, and geographical level of local offices held both before and during a senator's parliamentary tenure.[6] Figure 4 counts the number of senators that held any of 32 sub-national office types, and their corresponding geographical levels. By far, municipal-level offices are the most common, with a substantial number of senators serving as mayors. These data complement ongoing work on dual mandates in the French Third Republic (Cirone, 2017).

Voting behavior

From the official French Senate website,[7] we scraped and cleaned information on a total of 3,602 public RCVs from all but two of the Senate sessions between 1996 and 2017.[8] For each of these votes ("scrutins"), we collect the session and date, as well as the fundamental information needed for

any roll-call analysis: a senator's decision to vote yea/nay, abstain, or not participate.

Bill topics and descriptions

In addition to collecting data on senators' voting behavior on RCVs, we also provide information on the substantive content of these bills. Our first RCV characteristics dataset —"Bill Codes"— draws on data from two sources and includes RCVs taken between 2006 and 2017.

1. **Senate Website (2006–2017):** First, we scrape bill topic data from the French Senate website.[9] There are 30 distinct bill topics, and any given bill has between one and three codes. The Senate also provides short and long text descriptions of the bills.
2. **Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (2006–2013):** We supplement the French Senate's bill codes with ones from the CAP dataset (Baumgartner et al., 2009), where available. Although the CAP dataset begins in 1979, there are no data to map the CAP's unique bill numbers with the French Senate's bill numbers until 2006. We therefore provide the CAP bill topics for bills between 2006 and 2013, the last year in the CAP dataset. There are 21 distinct CAP bill topics.

Figure 5 plots the distribution of topics included in the Senate's categorization scheme.[10] Figure 6 provides the same information for the CAP coding scheme.

Due to the different time periods covered by our RCV data, the CAP data, and the Senate bill codes, not all bills
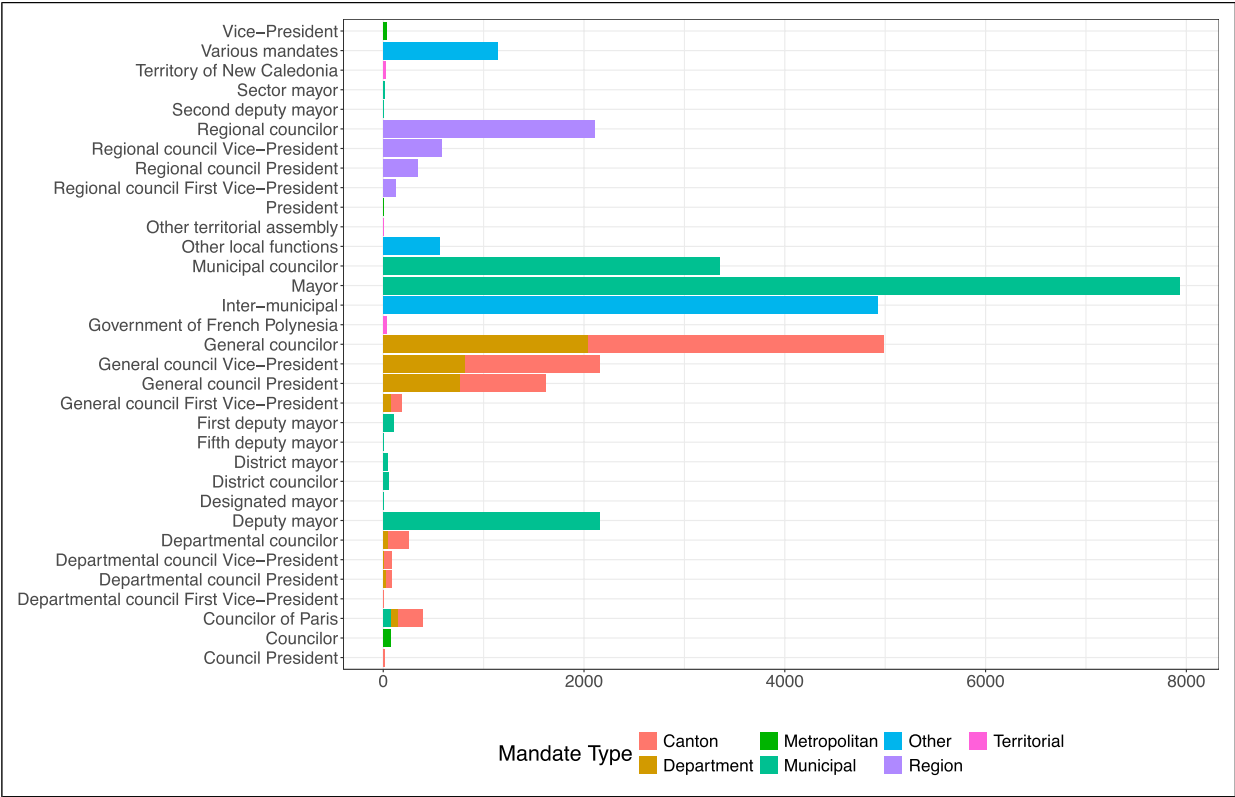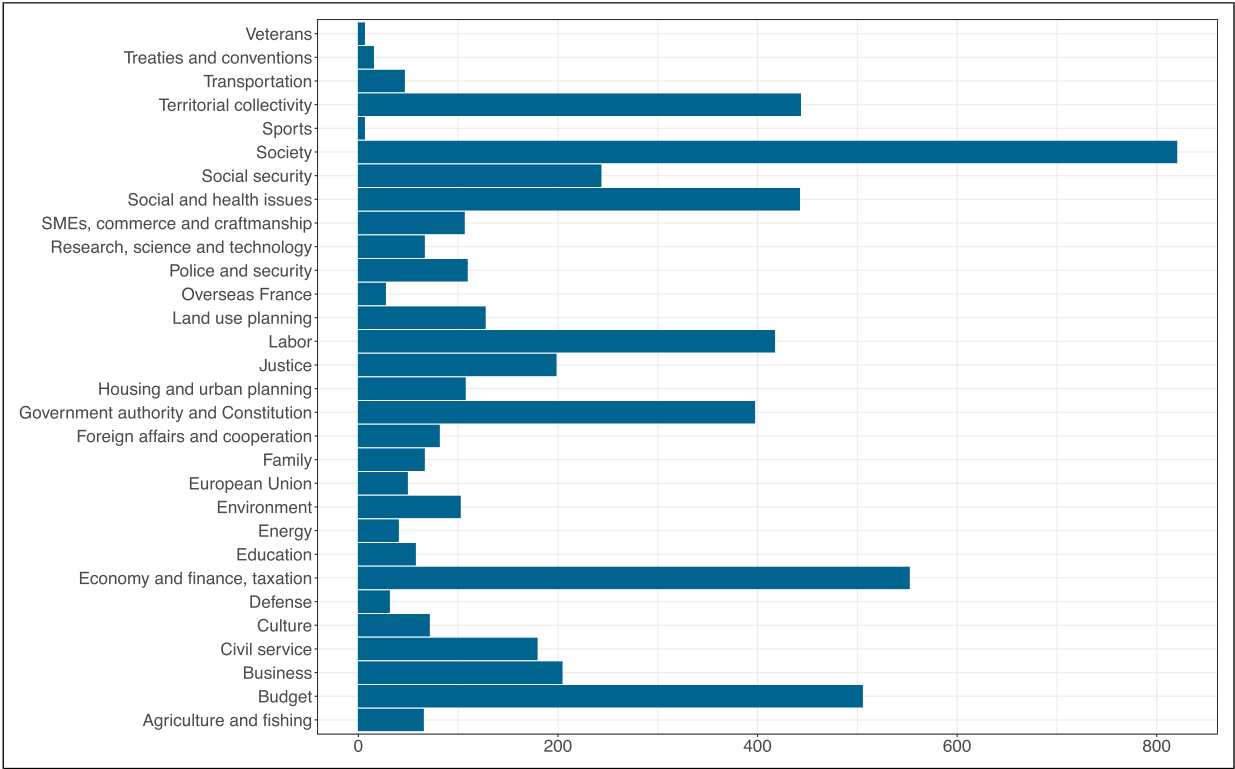
Figure 4. Count of dual mandate function by type.
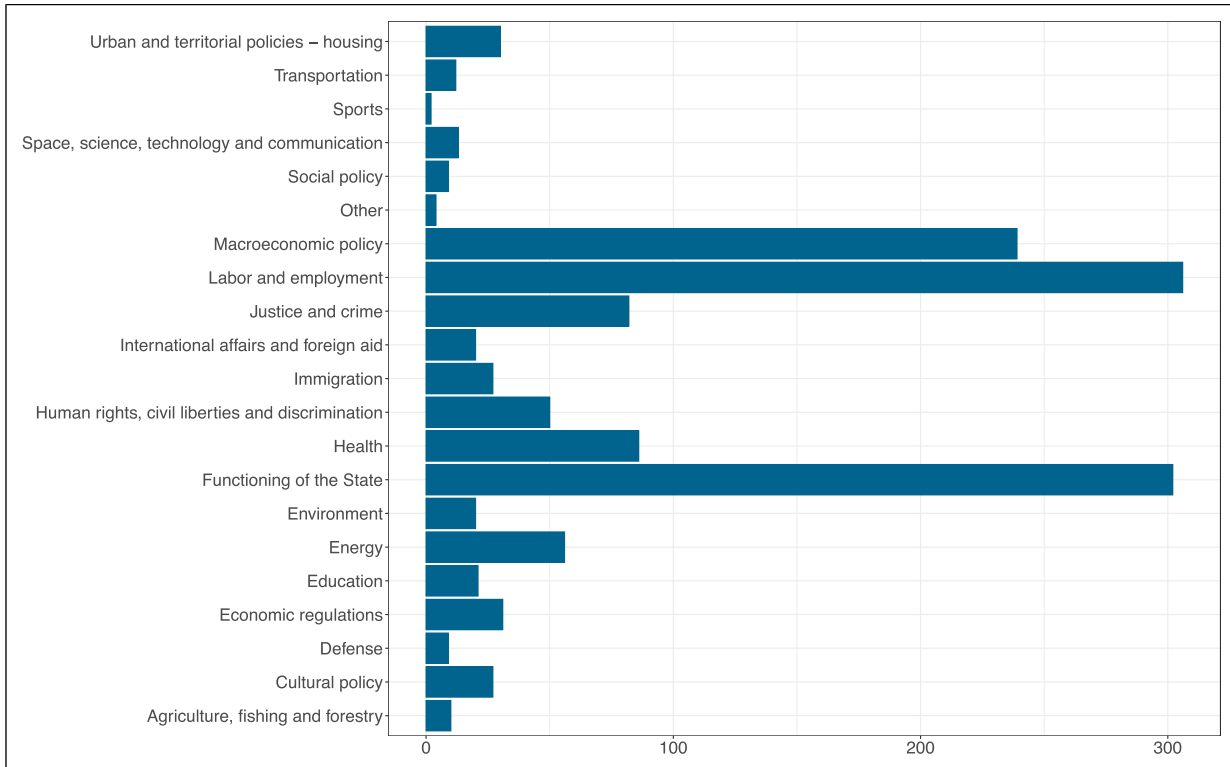

Figure 5. Senate bill codes, 2006–2017.

Figure 6. CAP bill codes, 2006–2013.

included in our RCV dataset have a Senate or CAP topic code. Although the Senate does not categorize bills by topic before 2006,[11] it does provide text-based descriptions for all bills. Therefore, we provide a "Bill Descriptions" dataset with the French and English descriptions of all bills in our RCV dataset.

Ideological alignment in the French Senate

RCV data is used to measure individual legislators' ideal points, party cohesion, and the dimensionality of a legislative policy space. Nominate scores have been used extensively to measure polarity in the US Congress (Poole and Rosenthal, 1985) and in legislatures with more than two political parties (Hix and Noury, 2009; Meyerrose, 2018). We apply dw-nominate —a dynamic extension of nominate that allows for intertemporal comparisons (McCarty, 2011)— to illustrate the ideological composition of and shifts in the French Senate. Since French parliamentary sessions only last 9 months, we divide the French Senate into sessions coinciding with the 3-year periods between elections.[12]

While historically party politics in western democracies was dominated by a single, economic ideological cleavage (Kitschelt, 1997), scholars today argue that the political space in these countries is better conceptualized along two distinct dimensions, with the second reflecting issues

stemming from globalization, such as immigration or pro/anti EU sentiment (Hix and Noury, 2009; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Focusing on France specifically, Gougou and Persico (2017) argue that the French political landscape was re-shaped again following the 2017 presidential election, with the first dimension realigning around issues related to immigration and authoritarianism/libertarianism, while the second pits ecologists and interventionists, on the one hand, against productivists that favor neoliberalism, on the other.

We follow this existing work on the dimensionality of politics and estimate the dw-nominate model along two dimensions using the dwnominate package in R. Following standard practices, we exclude individual RCVs for which the vote was either 97.5% for or against; remove legislators who did not vote at least 10 times in a session; and code abstentions as missing. Furthermore, we treat any senator that changed parties mid-session as multiple observations, distinguishing between votes cast under one party affiliation versus another. Finally, we use Philippe Adnot, a consistently right-wing senator present in all sessions, to orient the space. The results, grouped by party family, are shown in Figure 7. While this analysis traces general trends regarding parties' ideological position and cohesiveness over time, it cannot identify the content or character of the ideological dimensions in the French Senate. Our new dataset presents opportunities to evaluate
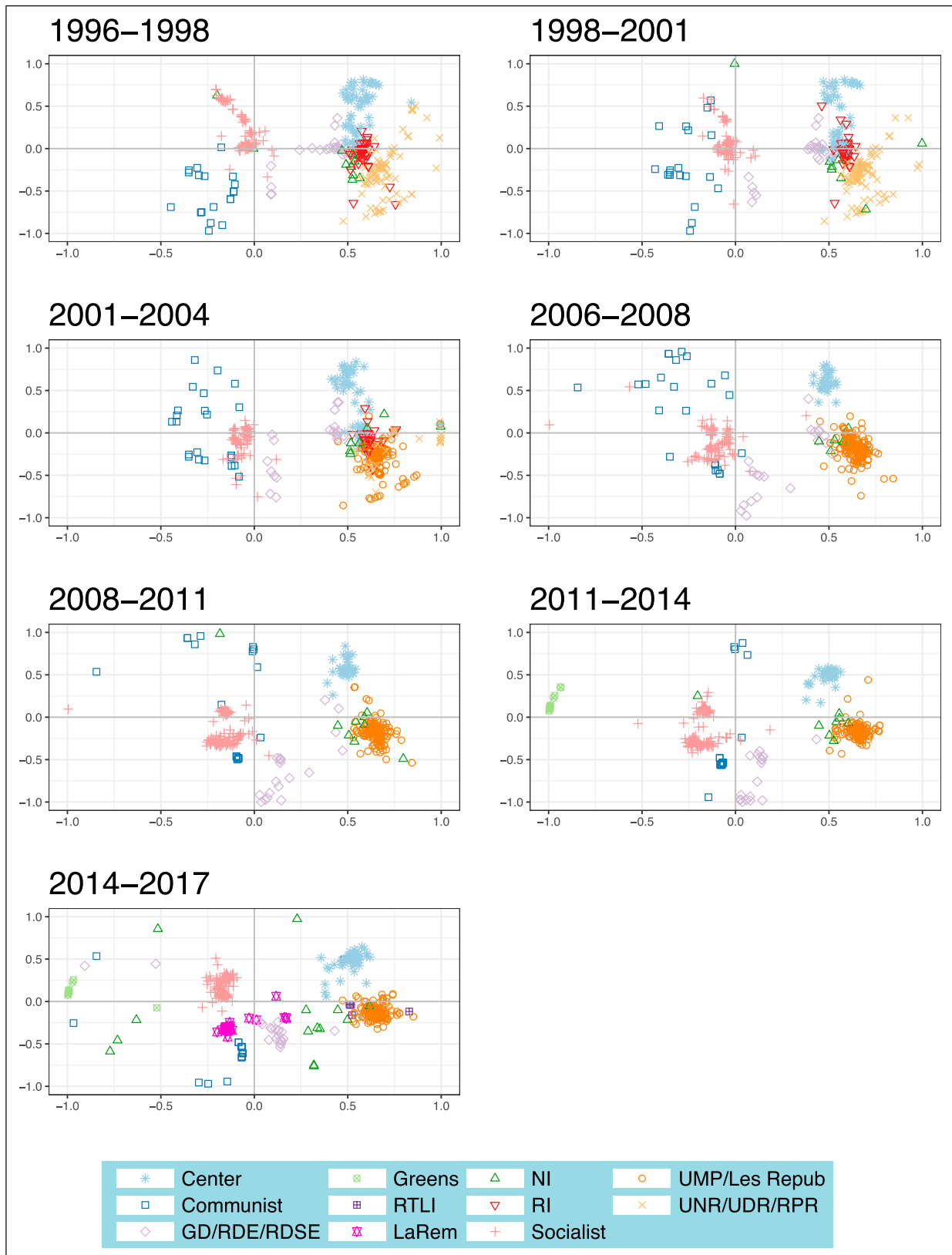
Figure 7. Dw-nominate, 1996–2017. *Note: RTIL = République et territoires - Les Indépendents; LaRem = La République En Marche! NI = Non-inscrits.*
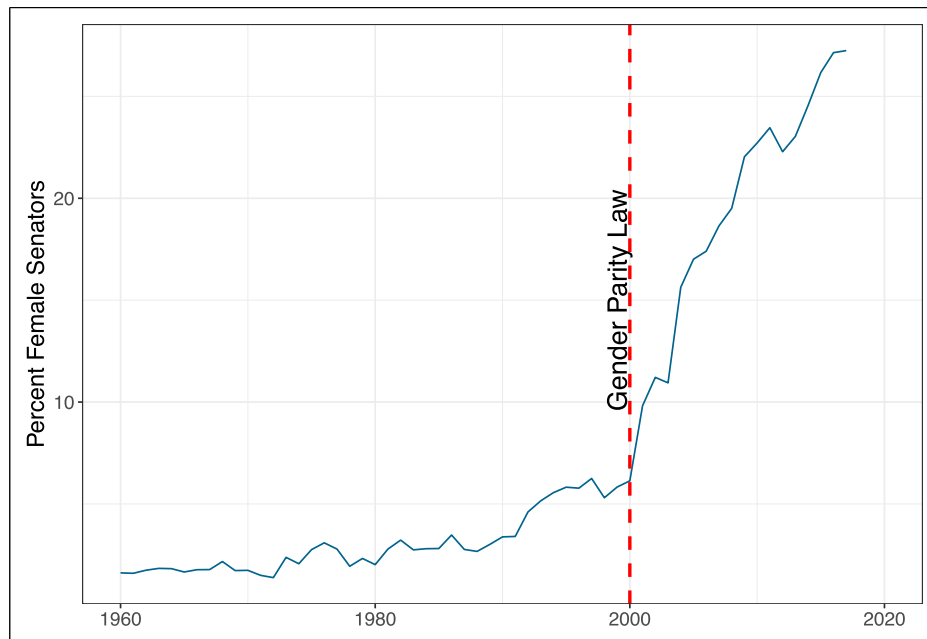
Figure 8. Gender composition of French senate prior to and after parity.

this both within and across France's legislative chambers as well as from a comparative perspective.

Possible research topics

We anticipate these data will contribute to several existing research agendas. First, temporal ideological shifts within the French Senate have implications for work on parties, polarization and populism (Watson, 2015; Golder, 2016; Muller, 2017; Pappas, 2019), and the related rise of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Meyerrose, 2020, 2024). The French electorate is one of the most polarized in Europe,[13] as evidenced most recently by the hung parliament resulting from the snap 2024 legislative elections.[14] Furthermore, despite being a strong contender in the 2002, 2017, and 2022 presidential elections, a prominent force in municipal elections, and winning close to one quarter or more of France's seats in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 European Parliament elections, the far-right National Rally[15] was underrepresented in national legislative politics until 2022. Our data provide opportunities to explore this disconnect between voters and elites, with implications for rising societal polarization (Vail et al., 2023).

These data also speak to broader questions about the nature and functioning of legislative institutions (Benoît and Rozenberg, 2020). Focusing on France, Money and Tsebelis (1995) analyze the functioning of bicameralism, while Huber (1996) theorizes the relationship between democratic institutions and democratic performance under the Fifth Republic. Our datasets, when combined with others in progress on legislative behavior in France's National Assembly (Cirone, 2017; Godbout and Foucault, 2013), can extend this work by exploring how bicameralism affects legislative processes, partisan competition and party cohesion, and policy outcomes. In addition, the French Senate's mixed electoral system offers a rich laboratory for studying questions surrounding the relationship between societal pressures, institutional contexts, and democratic responsiveness.[16]

Finally, our datasets on dual mandates, senators' biographical information, their constituencies, and bill characteristics are relevant to existing research on the impact of gender, career trajectory, and voter characteristics on legislators' voting behavior, party discipline, and policy priorities. As Figure 8 illustrates, the passage of the gender parity law in France led to a marked shift in the gender composition of the Senate. Our data on senators prior to and following this law's enactment will contribute to research on the consequences of gender parity laws, as well as their impact on the internal dynamics of parties, female citizen participation in politics, and shifts in legislative policy topics and debates (Threlfall, 2007; Meier, 2012; Barnes and Burchard, 2013; Edgell, 2017; Silva and Crisp, 2021).

In short, we anticipate these data will make an important contribution to the rapidly growing collection of detailed cross-national legislative data which, to our knowledge, has to-date focused primarily on lower legislative chambers. Our dataset will be an important step in advancing both within case and comparative legislative research agendas that incorporate relatively understudied upper legislative chambers.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Our data are available here: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NDXACL.
2. Sources: https://www.politiquemania.com/senatoriales.html and https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr. Our election data only begin in 1983 due to limited data availability. While Politiquemania contains electoral information for elections beginning in 1959, the results prior to 1983 are only reported at the national, rather than department, level.
3. Source: https://www.senat.fr/les-tables-des-debats.html. This information about individual senators, along with all other data available through the French Senate website, is covered under open license: https://data.senat.fr/licence/.
4. We also include information on the exact date on which a party switch occurred.
5. This has varied over time due to a constitutional requirement that the number of seats reflect population growth.
6. Source: https://data.senat.fr/les-senateurs/.
7. https://www.senat.fr/.
8. For the 2004–2005 and 2005–2006 sessions, the Senate only published vote totals, not individual RCVs.
9. https://www.senat.fr/travaux-parlementaires.html.
10. Because the Senate website provides up to three categories for any scrutin, the sum of bills across all topics is greater than the number of RCVs. "Society," the most common bill type in our dataset, encompasses a wide array of issues. Helpfully, the French Senate also provides descriptions of each bill, which we include in our "Bill Codes" dataset. The ten most common descriptions of "society" bills and their corresponding counts, are: "travail et dialogue social" (work and social dialogue) (163); "retraites" (retirement) (95); "égalité et citoyenneté" (equality and citizenship) (38); "Mariage pour couples de personnes de même sex" (same sex marriage) (37); "bio-éthique" (bioethics) (21); "santé" (health) (32); "audiovisual" (broadcasting) (20); "confiance dans la vie politique" (confidence in political life) (19); "immigration, intégration et asile" (immigration, integration, and asylum) (18); and "logement et exclusion" (housing and homelessness) (18).
11. Officially, the Senate began categorizing bills into topics in 2004. However, they did not make RCV data available for 2004–2006.
12. Due to a Constitutional Council ruling, the Senate had one 4-year period between elections (2004–2008).
13. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-polarisation-poll-idUSKBN1810MT.
14. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/13/france-contemplates-chaosafter-the-general-election-with-no-clear-winner-and-the-olympics-just-weeks-away.
15. Formerly the Front National.
16. For example, Meyerrose and Watson (2024).

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