Modern & Contemporary France

ISSN: 0963-9489 (Print) 1469-9869 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmcf20

Introduction

Political Communication in the Fifth Republic

Raymond Kuhn

To cite this article: Raymond Kuhn (2005) Introduction, Modern & Contemporary France, 13:3, 269-271, DOI: 10.1080/09639480500211473

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09639480500211473

Published online: 19 Aug 2006.

Modern & Contemporary France
Vol. 13, No. 3, August 2005, pp. 269–271

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

Political Communication in the Fifth Republic

Raymond Kuhn

There are four main reasons to study political communication in the Fifth Republic. The first relates to the extensive reach and social intrusiveness of the media. Like their counterparts in other advanced democracies, French voters mostly learn about political events and issues—whether local, regional, national, supranational or global—via the news media of press, broadcasting and the Internet. Since 1958 a highly developed and complex media system has evolved in France. While the newspaper sector may have contracted in terms of number of titles and overall circulation figures, by the same criteria the magazine sector has hugely expanded. Growth has been particularly evident in broadcasting as a result of public policy decisions taken in the 1980s to open up radio and television to private competition and the subsequent entry into these markets of new suppliers of programming. More recently, the technological shift from analogue to digital has allowed for a significant increase in the number of radio stations and television channels, including rolling news networks. Meanwhile the Internet has joined the established media to serve as an additional site and vehicle of political communication. While especially useful for marginal groups, the Internet is also utilised by traditional political actors for both one-way information provision and two-way interactive communication with voters. All in all, there is now an extensive supply of political information made available via the different news media in France.

The articles in this special issue were first presented as papers at a conference entitled *Spin, Image and the Media: Political Communication in France and Britain* held at the Maison Française in Oxford in November 2004. I should like to thank the director, M. Alexis Tadié, and the staff of the Maison Française for their help in hosting the conference. I should also like to thank my co-organiser, Dr Dominic Wring of the University of Loughborough, and all those who gave papers on political communication in Britain. I am pleased to acknowledge the financial assistance provided the conference by the ASMCF and the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom.
Correspondence to: Raymond Kuhn, Department of Politics, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK. Email: R.Kuhn@qmul.ac.uk

ISSN 0963-9489 (print)/ISSN 1469-9869 (online)/05/030269-3

DOI: 10.1080/09639480500211473

The second reason is linked to the power of the media. They help, for example, to set the political agenda and establish the criteria by which politicians are assessed by voters. In highlighting some issues over others—for instance, *l'insécurité* over unemployment in the 2002 French presidential election campaign—and by framing these issues from a particular perspective, the news media contribute to a process whereby the competence and leadership skills of politicians are evaluated by the electorate. This is not to argue that the media simply determine voter attitudes and behaviour. The power of the media to shape public opinion on a particular issue always needs to be contextualised with reference to broader cultural, economic and sociopolitical factors. For instance, with reference to the proposed ratification of the EU constitution in the 2005 referendum campaign, if the media had been really all-powerful one might have anticipated a resounding 'Yes' vote rather than the victory of the 'No' camp. Moreover, frequently the media follow public opinion rather than shaping it. Nonetheless, while the precise extent of their power may be open to dispute, there is no doubt that the media can be powerful political actors—and are regarded as such by politicians.

Third, elite political actors are increasingly conscious of the importance of mediated public communication, evidenced by the amount of time and resources they spend on media-related activities: from cultivating relations with friendly proprietors and journalists to managing their public image, from influencing news coverage to staging pseudo events for media consumption. For politicians television has long been the medium of political communication par excellence during the Fifth Republic. Not only did the regime and the medium take root simultaneously during the 1960s, but de Gaulle consciously used television to build up support for the new institutions. Television allows politicians to speak live to a nationwide audience and for their gestures and body language to be seen supporting the oral message. In their television appearances elite political actors may choose a formal register and a classic format—for example, an interview with a journalist—to emphasise their authority and competence or select an informal register in a non-conventional format—such as a late-night chat show—to stress their personable and human qualities. Television is an excellent medium for conveying emotion: this gives the viewers the illusion of intimacy with their politicians, who in turn seek to seduce voters as much as persuade them. Whether for a new generation of media users the Internet will in the future replace television as *the* medium of political communication in France remains to be seen. In any case, just as they had to adapt to the exigencies of television in the early years of the regime, French politicians are now learning new communication techniques, such as the 'blog', appropriate for the Internet age.

The final reason to study political communication in the Fifth Republic concerns the role of the public, who, along with the media and politicians, form the third side of a triangular relationship characterised by multilevel interdependence. As voters the French have become more electorally pragmatic and harder to mobilise. As citizens they are cynical about politicians and quick to criticise their motivation and behaviour. As media users they no longer behave as a captive mass audience, but rather

as informed consumers who make their selection from a diversity of mainstream, minority and specialist outlets and, more recently, as active participants in different forms of political communication on the Internet. If one joins up these different trends in public behaviour, it is pertinent to speculate about the extent to which the media are implicated in the twin phenomena of voter turn-off and citizen disillusion in contemporary France.

Each of the articles in this special issue represents a contribution to a specific debate in the relevant sub-area of the field of political communication and can be read quite independently of the others. Moreover, even when read as a whole, this volume cannot pretend to be comprehensive in its coverage of such a vast topic as 'political communication in the Fifth Republic'. What this special issue does achieve, however, is to shed light on an important aspect of French politics which until now has—with the possible exception of election communication—been largely marginalised in the Anglo-American research literature