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France: Election by Default, 2002

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Summary

On May 5, 2002, the French people re-elected Jacques Chirac president, and on June 16 gave him a center-right parliamentary majority. The tumultuous two-round presidential elections saw the elimination of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round, and left the racist, extreme right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen as Chirac's opponent in the second round. Chirac won by a wide margin, but many voters, perhaps a majority, were voting against Le Pen. Chirac and Le Pen both ran on a campaign to quell "insecurity," a euphemism for a rising crime rate. Many observers believe that the main candidates did not address France's principal problems during the campaign.

A New Government

On June 16, 2002, French voters elected a National Assembly that gave the center-right a majority. President Jacques Chirac named Jean-Pierre Raffarin prime minister. The parliamentary election and appointment of Raffarin ended five years of *cohabitation*, in which the president and prime minister were of different parties. Raffarin breaks a long tradition of prime ministers who have made their careers in Paris; he is a native of Poitou, and was president of a regional council. His appointment is in part an effort by Chirac to demonstrate that France will be governed more by a "man of the provinces," close to the people, than by someone of the political elite that has dominated the Fifth Republic, founded by General Charles de Gaulle in 1958.

The Chirac-Raffarin team has announced the keystones of its policies: an immediate 5% income tax cut, with a 30% cut over a longer term; a crackdown on street crime; and a reform of the pension system. The pension system now consumes approximately 12% of GDP. France also faces a growing budget deficit; under EU strictures it must not exceed 3% of GDP. Chirac has gained a partial exemption from the EU rule, with Brussels ruling that France need only be close to the 3% margin.

The French left suffered a devastating defeat in the parliamentary elections. The Socialists saw their seats in the Assembly reduced from 248 to 141. Several key party figures, such as Martine Aubry, author of the controversial law implementing a 35-hour work week, were defeated. The party is in the early stages of a struggle to appoint a

successor to Lionel Jospin, its defeated presidential candidate, as its leader. The Socialists must first decide whether they wish to pursue a more leftist line than the moderate Jospin, or move to a more centrist position. The Communists continued their decline of the past decade, winning only 21 seats, and seeing their leader, Robert Hue, lose his seat. The Greens won only 3 seats.

The racist, anti-immigrant National Front party of Le Pen won no seats, although it had a strong showing in a number of districts.

The Presidential Elections, Second Round

On May 5, 2002, center-right candidate Chirac won re-election as President of the Fifth Republic. He gained 82.15% of the vote against his opponent, the extreme rightist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front, who won 17.85%. The election marked the first time since 1969 that a leftist candidate did not reach the second round.

Despite Chirac's large margin in vote-getting, French observers have widely interpreted his victory as a hollow one, with the vote seen as a referendum against Le Pen rather than a vote for Chirac. Chirac's percentage of the vote was the highest ever by a winning candidate in the Fifth Republic (General de Gaulle, at the high tide of his popularity, won 55% of the vote in the 1965 elections.). Ironically, a majority of Chirac's votes seems to have come from the left and the extreme left, whose multiple parties (with the exception of one Trotskyite party) instructed their followers to vote for the incumbent president. An exit poll on May 5 indicated that only 13% of those asked said that they voted for Chirac's program; approximately 75% said that they voted against Le Pen. Chirac's "election by default" could impede his effort to build legitimacy for his presidency.¹ After his first-round finish, many observers expected Chirac to reach out to leftist voters as well as his base on the right; instead, he continued to excoriate the policies of Jospin's Socialist government, blaming it for the rising crime rate and France's declining competitiveness in global markets. Followers of the leftist parties, many of whom voted for Chirac to prevent a victory by Le Pen, demonstrated in major cities the night of May 5, and warned of a general strike to protest the political system, which they believe gave them choices that they opposed.

Due to a constitutional change, Chirac will serve a five-year term, a reduction from the seven-year term of previous Fifth-Republic presidents. Since 1997, he had governed in a period of "*cohabitation*" with Prime Minister Jospin's coalition of Socialists, Communists, and Greens. Neither the left nor the right found the experience satisfactory, and blamed each other for the often contradictory themes and objectives sounded by Chirac and Jospin.

The First Round: a Dissatisfied Electorate

The campaign for the first round vote of April 21 was widely viewed as a race between Chirac, 69, and Jospin, 64. Chirac had narrowly defeated Jospin in the presidential race in 1995. Journalists across the political spectrum criticized the two men

¹ Gérard Courtois, "Analyse: Jacques Chirac, otage de sa victoire," *Le Monde* (henceforth 'LM'), May 6, 2002; "Chirac names Prime Minister," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2002, p. A17.

as tired political warhorses. In 1997, Jospin had to cobble together a coalition on the left to form a government.

During the first-round campaign, Jospin's supporters proclaimed what they believed to be his principal achievements: lowering the unemployment rate from 13% in 1997 to under 9% in 2002; reduction of the work week to 35 hours; privatization of key state-run industries; and a policy towards the EU that described France's preferred role as providing ideas and forging compromises, in contrast to Chirac's extolling of France's "grandeur" and claim that France must lead the EU's key initiatives. However, Jospin himself largely abandoned any notion of running for the presidency on his government's proclaimed accomplishments. Instead, he ran on the theme of combating "insecurity," a euphemism for a rising crime rate. In 1994, there were 100,000 violent crimes against individuals in France; in 2001, there were nearly 400,000. Jospin's calculation may have been to upstage Chirac, who for years had run on hard law-and-order platforms.² While Chirac was mayor of Paris in the 1970s and 1980s, the city's police arrested and deported large numbers of illegal aliens from north Africa, a practice viewed as a component of his effort to limit crime.

Jospin's governing coalition began to crumble as the presidential campaign opened. Sixteen parties, of which nine could be classified as either left or center-left, ran candidates. For example, there were two Trotskyite parties as well as the traditional Communist Party; a Green Party; and a socialist party with a nationalist tinge that opposed privatization. In the campaign, their candidates battered Jospin as well as Chirac.

On the extreme right, Le Pen, 73, was portrayed in the media as a man of the past; a fourth- or fifth-place finish was projected for him. He had once dismissed the holocaust as "a detail of history." But Le Pen had built his long political career on his attacks on immigrants, particularly the 4 to 5 million Moslems from north Africa (in a total population of 59 million). Since September 11, he had claimed that "terror comes from immigrants," and that "France is for the French." On several occasions during his public career, he had been fined heavily for racist remarks or for denying the holocaust, crimes under French law. Other parts of his often vague agenda have for years included anti-EU themes (although he is a member of the European Parliament, a seat he uses to ridicule the EU), protectionist measures for French products, and scoring of the United States as a multi-cultural super power that has imposed globalization on an unwilling world.

Apathy towards tired and familiar candidates led to a first-round voter turnout of 72%, the second highest in the history of the French Republic. The left's "boutique parties" each sliced away at Jospin's total with their specific agendas. There was a broad sentiment on the left that Jospin had become "*gauche-caviar*," a derisive term meaning that he was an armchair intellectual turned "bourgeois" who had abandoned traditional leftist positions of state-owned industries that supported the workers, and care for the under-privileged.

² Jean-Michel Thenard, "Les Clés d'une débâcle," *Libération*, April 23, 2002; Thenard, "Comment l'impensable est arrivé," *Libération*, April 22, 2002; "Discontent exposed in a 'hidden vote' for French rightist," *New York Times*, May 3, 2002, p. A1. French crime statistics do not include race or country of origin, and there is therefore no clear statistical evidence whether immigrants are responsible for the rising crime rate.

The results of the first-round vote contained numerous surprises. Under the French system, the candidates with the two largest vote totals move on to the second round. Chirac finished first, with only 19.83% of the vote, the lowest percentage ever, by a wide margin, for a Fifth-Republic incumbent president. Le Pen finished second, with 16.91% of the vote. He narrowly eliminated Jospin, who had 16.14% of the vote, having lost to Le Pen by 230,000 votes of 30 million cast. Jospin announced his retirement from politics. Robert Hue, the Communist candidate, won only 3.38% of the vote, the lowest ever for a Communist presidential candidate. The vote for each of the two Trotskyite candidates surpassed that of Hue, leaving the future of both Hue and the Communist Party in doubt.

Assessment of the Election

Many journalists in Europe and the United States drew the conclusion after the first round that France had become a racist country, and that Le Pen's relative success was a sign of rising intolerance in the Fifth Republic. Most French officials and intellectuals, not surprisingly, deny this charge. In fact, there seem to be several themes dominating the minds of French voters that determined the election.

France has long struggled to integrate its north African population into the mainstream of its social and political life.³ In contrast, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a large inflow of poor Italians and Spaniards, not a few of whom had radical political ideas. Over time these immigrants were assimilated, and many of their heirs enjoy senior positions in French politics, business, and universities. North African immigrants came to France in large numbers in the wake of the Algerian War, some fleeing an authoritarian government and political unrest, others looking for work. Large numbers of such immigrants live in the shanty town apartment buildings that ring Paris and major French industrial cities. Along with them came large numbers of *pieds noirs*, French citizens born in north Africa but no longer welcome there in the anti-colonial climate. Le Pen was one such immigrant, a former army paratrooper. He brought with him a belief that the Algerians were inferior, capable only of menial work, and a view that Islam would sully Catholic France. From the beginning of his political career in the 1960s, he had a following of 8 to 15% of the population, mostly poorly educated workers and young people, groups who feared that north Africans would take their jobs in poor economic times.

During the campaign neither Chirac nor Jospin confronted the issue of the immigrant population's place in France. Jospin, always viewed as a man of probity and toleration, may have legitimized the theme of "insecurity" by centering the crime rate as the key issue, hoping to steal Chirac's and Le Pen's principal issue. By doing so, he ensured, perhaps inadvertently, that it would dominate the campaign and lend legitimacy to Chirac's and Le Pen's longstanding concentration on the issue.⁴ The terrorist attacks of September 11 and rising tensions in the Middle East appear to have fed the French population's fears. The arrest of suspected terrorists connected with al Qaeda was seized

³ In recent polls, 33% of those responding see north Africans as a threat, and 56% say "there are too many immigrants in France." Ten percent responded that "Jews have too much power" in France. Presentation by Roland Cayrol at the Brookings Institution, June 24, 2002.

⁴ Serge July, "Affreux," *Libération*, April 22, 2002.

upon in particular by Le Pen as a sign that French citizens were in danger of attack by the Moslem minority. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict led to sharp criticisms of Israel by some leaders of France's Moslem community, and appears to have fed a concern in France that such sympathy could lead to violence in French cities. Due to its large Moslem population and its long colonial history in the Arab Middle East, French observers have believed for half a century that conflict in any part of the Middle East would immediately be felt in social tensions at home. Chirac promised tough measures against crime, seen by the voters as his greatest area of competency. The promised crackdown on crime became associated, especially on the right, with a promised hard response to terrorism. These sentiments dominated the minds of voters who turned out for Chirac and Le Pen.⁵

Some observers in France have long called for measures, primarily through the educational system, to integrate the country's Moslem population into French life. By most accounts, efforts to encourage cultural diversity – especially if that diversity is non-European and non-Catholic – in France have failed.⁶ The French, particularly French politicians, believe that their educational system is exceptional, and it is rare for the political elite to call for its reform, perhaps because most of them are products of that system. French intellectuals often state that France is egalitarian, in that the capable and the hard-working are rewarded, but that the country does not embrace “equal opportunity,” which implies that all have the same opportunity, regardless of ability. Those who criticize the French social and educational system contend that it is geared for the privileged and for those of French heritage, and that it discriminates against the poor, the rural, and the immigrant.⁷

Some French observers believe that the political system has grown sclerotic, dominated by aging political warhorses who avoid the country's problems. In addition to “the refusal of cultural diversity,” the need for pension reform and improved productivity have troubled the political landscape in recent years. Chirac and Jospin rarely discussed these issues in the presidential campaign, and Le Pen never touched upon them in a concrete, meaningful way. One of the reasons for Chirac's poor showing in the first round was that many French believe that he is corrupt and opposed to reform. In the past five years, he was charged with corruption from his period as mayor of Paris, only to see the investigation halted when France's highest court said that he could not be indicted while in office; he blocked a reform of the French Senate and of the practice of holding multiple offices, widely seen as an abuse of power; and he opposed decentralization of a number of the government's functions, despite clear public sentiment in favor of giving more authority to regional and local governments. One respected French observer called the main candidates “an ageing and corrupt clique, mummified in

⁵ Thenard, “Clés d'une débâcle;” Nicolas Baverez, “Chirac ducks the challenge,” *Financial Times*, April 30, 2002, p.15; Jean-Marie Colombani, “La blessure,” *LM*, April 22, 2002.

⁶ An interesting, perhaps partial exception to this view is that many Cambodians and Vietnamese are reasonably well-integrated into French life, perhaps because many of them are Catholic and many came to France with a good education. One vignette of this tendency is that it is not uncommon to see French Asians marching in Paris in monarchist demonstrations – a tiny part of the political spectrum, but an enduring and often wealthy one.

⁷ Interviews with French officials and academics, February-May 2002.

the privileges of an oligarchy of technocrats.”⁸ While such a judgment seems harsh, the virtual absence of rising young political leaders with an opportunity to climb the political ladder to the presidency has contributed to the sentiment that the political elite is unresponsive.

U.S.-French Relations

Since September 11, 2001, the United States and France have worked closely together in the conflict to subdue international terrorism. France has forces in central Asia that have engaged in combat missions against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and has tightened its already tough anti-terrorism laws at home to weaken elements of the Al Qaeda network there.

A Chirac-Raffarin team is likely to take a more assertive stance in the European Union than the government of former prime minister Jospin. Chirac, in the past, has said that France must take the lead in shaping the EU. He has, for example, strongly supported a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), under which the EU would develop a defense capability. Both the Clinton and Bush Administrations have supported this policy as long as it leads to greater burdensharing by the allies. The Bush Administration has said that ESDP must not become a rival to NATO, and seek to use high-readiness NATO forces, or develop separate planning and command structures, which might prove to be a waste of valuable defense resources.

Chirac and the new foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, fully back the EU position on a Middle East peace settlement, which differs from that of President Bush in several significant areas. While President Bush has called for an end to the rule of Palestinian leader Arafat, the French government has said that the Palestinians must elect their own leader, and that other countries must work with Arafat now as the duly elected Palestinian leader; in addition, France, unlike the United States, echoes the EU call for an international peace conference to map a future settlement of issues. France believes that the EU, along with the United States, the UN, and Russia, must have a role in brokering a peace agreement. The United States and France agree that there must eventually be a Palestinian state.

Finally, Jacques Chirac is above all a Gaullist and views himself as the heir to General de Gaulle’s legacy. Chirac founded the Gaullist party, the Rally for the Republic (RPR). His descriptions of the United States are latter-day Gaullism: he views the United States as “unilateralist,” and too assertive and independent in global affairs; and he has criticized the Congress as “isolationist” and lacking knowledge about world events. At the same time, like de Gaulle, in times of crisis, Chirac has strongly supported the United States; after September 11, as already noted, he ordered the French military and intelligence community to provide important resources to the U.S. effort in Afghanistan.

⁸ Baverez, “Chirac ducks the challenge.”

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