

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 6 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN FRANCE JUNE 13 2004

**Sally Marthaler
Sussex European Institute
University of Sussex
Email: s.a.marthaler@sussex.ac.uk**

Key points:

- 41 parties contested the European elections in France with an average of 21 lists in the eight constituencies.
- These elections were somewhat eclipsed by the regional elections which had taken place just two-and-a-half months earlier.
- A new voting system was introduced, replacing the single national constituency with eight regional constituencies.
- European issues were highlighted in all the parties' programmes and the Greens and the Christian-Democratic Union for French Democracy (UDF) in particular led Europe-centred campaigns.
- Turnout, at 42.78%, was the lowest ever recorded for an election in France and 4% less than in 1999.
- The opposition Socialist Party were the clear winners with 28.89% of the vote, 12% ahead of the governing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).
- 7 parties polled more than the 5% of the vote necessary to send MEPs to the European Parliament (2 fewer than in 1999).
- Support for the Eurosceptic parties was down on 1999.

The Context

The 2004 European elections came at a critical point in the French electoral calendar, falling midway between presidential elections, and just two and a half months after regional elections which had been the first test of the strength of the parties since the momentous presidential and parliamentary elections of 2002.¹ The regional elections in March had also seen a dramatic reversal in the fortunes of the Socialists just two years after their candidate, Lionel Jospin, failed to make the second round of the presidential elections. They therefore somewhat eclipsed the elections to the European

¹ See: C. Fieschi, 'Europe and the French Presidential and Legislative Elections of April/May 2002' *Opposing Europe Research Network /Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 14*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper4france.pdf>.

Parliament, which cannot be seen in isolation from them. In addition, the European elections were the last to be held in France until the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2007, and the potential presidential candidates were already jockeying for position.

A new voting system was introduced for these European elections, with a view to bringing them closer to the voters and making MEPs more accountable. Instead of a single constituency formed by the national territory as previously, the country was divided into eight regional constituencies (seven metropolitan and one overseas). Voting was by proportional representation from lists according to the highest average rule in a single ballot with seats distributed between the lists obtaining more than 5% of the votes cast.²

The domestic focus in the months preceding the election was on social issues, in particular pensions and health insurance reform, both of which would potentially have a profound effect on the welfare state so highly prized by the French. Unsurprisingly, then, a great deal of importance was attached to the social dimension of European integration: 86% of those interviewed in an exit poll³ gave a more 'social' Europe as their motivation for voting, 66% on the centre left but also 50% on the centre right. In a Sofres poll in April 2004⁴, 67% expressed a positive attitude towards Europe, but this was tempered by dissatisfaction with European social policy.

Given the seemingly intractable problem of unemployment in France, expectations were also high of the EU's role in the economic sphere, in terms of reducing unemployment (83%) and increasing growth (83%), and in the diplomatic sphere, in terms of maintaining peace in Europe (92%), anti-terrorism activities (89%), Europe's global influence (83%) and worldwide conflict reduction (83%).⁵

To set this in a broader context, the most recent Eurobarometer survey⁶ put French support for European integration at 43%, although a CSA poll in April 2004⁷ gave a more even split with 50% for and 49% against European integration.

In these elections, European issues were more salient to voters than previously: 64% said they had based their vote on European issues (compared with 52% in 1999) and 31% on national issues (36% in 1999).⁸ Media coverage of enlargement and the constitutional treaty, as well as the sixtieth anniversary of the D-Day landings in June, raised the profile of European affairs, as did the obvious connection with the debate on social reforms to be carried out in France.

The campaign

41 parties contested the European elections in France with an average of 21 lists in the eight regional constituencies. In addition to the parties of the moderate and extreme

² The relevant legislation was passed in April 2003.

³ Louis Harris post-election poll, 13 June 2004.

⁴ Sofres 28-30 April 2004.

⁵ Louis Harris poll, 6-7 May 2004.

⁶ Eurobarometer 61, Spring 2004.

⁷ CSA poll, 20-22 April 2004.

⁸ CSA exit poll, 13 June 2004.

left and right, these included the two Eurosceptic ‘sovereignist’ parties, Philippe de Villiers’ Movement for France (Mouvement pour la France: MPF) and Charles Pasqua’s Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la France: RPF).

Proportional representation encouraged a profusion of single issue parties including the hunters’ party Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Traditions (*Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions*: CPNT), this time without Jean Saint-Josse, who decided not to stand after a poor showing in the regional elections. A number of parties were created specifically for the European elections on such diverse issues as the Palestinian and Basque causes, the defence of motorists, the promotion of Esperanto, lower taxes, as well as a royalist list.

De Villiers entered the fray first and early (April 7), seizing the initiative and leading an energetic campaign built around opposition to Turkish membership of the EU and defence of Europe’s Christian heritage, and with an uncompromising slogan, “No to Turkey in Europe” (which he later tried – unsuccessfully – to patent). The MPF strategy also included poaching CPNT voters after the Hunters’ party’s rout in March, and some CPNT candidates transferred to de Villiers’ lists, which were opened up to other Eurosceptic candidates. No agreement was reached with Pasqua’s RPF to run joint lists as in 1999 and Pasqua presented separate lists in six constituencies. Jean Marie Le Pen launched his campaign on 1 May, the day on which the FN traditionally commemorate Jeanne d’Arc, and also focused on the Turkish question. The other parties waited until Europe Day (9 May) to launch their campaigns.

The election campaign operated at three different levels, superposing European and domestic issues, but with a party political undercurrent. The European dimension centred on Turkey’s membership of the EU, holding a referendum on the constitutional treaty and the choice between a liberal or social Europe.

De Villiers’ offensive on Turkey highlighted a potentially dangerous fault-line on the right. Turkey’s membership of the EU was not only opposed by the Eurosceptic MPF, National Front (Front national: FN) and National Republican Movement (Mouvement national républicain: MNR) but also by the Europhile Union for French Democracy (Union pour la démocratie française: UDF), as well as its founder and president of the European convention, Giscard d’Estaing. However, Chirac had often stated that he accepted the principle of Turkey’s entry (as indeed de Gaulle himself had done in 1963). The isolation of the governing Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire: UMP) within the right on this issue could have proved costly if it had taken centre stage in the election campaign and dominated the pre-election debate. On the day that de Villiers launched his campaign in early April, the UMP president, Alain Juppé, announced that the party would not accept Turkish membership of the EU. This produced a schizophrenic state of affairs in which the President’s party was in apparent opposition to the President, a situation which was confirmed when Jacques Chirac subsequently gave only his third national press conference since becoming president in 1995 during which he stated that Turkish membership of the EU was “desirable in the long term”.

The UMP’s U-turn, while stealing some of the Eurosceptics’ thunder, also opened the party up to accusations of opportunism. De Villiers characterised it as a tactical move, describing the UMP position as a ‘no’ to Turkey until 13 June and a ‘yes’ thereafter.

The Socialist Party (Parti socialiste: PS) put it down to electoral panic but nonetheless underlined the fact that, since Turkey had not yet met all the necessary conditions, the question of its entry was indeed premature. In fact, it was not in the PS' interests to engage in a full debate on the issue since they in turn were concerned that this would obscure the issue which they wanted to highlight, that of a social Europe. This issue was critical to their campaign because it was the one which united the PS, threatened with its own internal division with its minor factions⁹ who opposed the constitutional treaty because of the priority it gave to liberal policies. In order to placate these factions, the party leadership agreed to place more emphasis on social matters such as demands for a European directive on public services, a European minimum wage and action to prevent the relocations likely to result from the 2004 enlargement.

The question of whether the constitutional treaty should be ratified by parliament or by referendum was also a contentious issue between the UMP (who were in favour of a referendum) and the President, who said at his press conference on 29 April that it was "premature" to make a decision on this. The other parties on the right all wanted a referendum and the PS, the Greens and the Communist Party (PCF) were also broadly in favour.

The new voting system with eight regional constituencies made it more difficult to organise debate at a national level. In previous European elections where there had been a single national constituency, parties campaigned from the centre with high-profile candidates leading their lists and dominating media coverage. Although there were still some well-known figures standing (de Villiers, Pasqua, Olivier Besancenot, Michel Rocard, Pierre Moscovici, Harlem Désir), their campaigning had a much lower profile, restricted as it was to the regional constituency that they were contesting.

Europe featured strongly in all the parties' manifestos and campaign literature, covering the ideological spectrum from calls for workers to unite across the EU (Communist Revolutionary League-Workers' Struggle, Ligue communiste révolutionnaire-Lutte ouvrière: LCR-LO), to an alternative people's Europe for trade unionists, feminists, anti-globalists and anti-racists (PCF) through the PS "And now a social Europe", the Greens' "Green contract for Europe" to the Eurosceptics' "France first in a Europe of nations" (RPF), "Let's change Europe to protect the French (MPF), "Yes to Europe, no to Turkey!" (MNR) and "For respect in Europe for France's rights, interest and sovereignty [and] against Turkey in the EU" (FN).

The UDF and the Greens both ran very EU-centred campaigns, the Greens focusing on the trans-national dimension and defending a common platform with their counterparts in other countries of the EU. The UDF leader, François Bayrou, insisted throughout on European issues being at the heart of the campaign, with the clear intention of raising the level of debate on European integration but also to maintain the UDF's high profile and demonstrate that it was still an independent force on the right to be reckoned with by the UMP.

⁹ *Nouveau Monde* (New World), led by Henri Emmanuelli and *Nouveau Parti Socialiste* (NPS), the New Socialist Party, led by Arnaud Montebourg and Vincent Peillon.

The UMP, squeezed between the Eurosceptic and Europhile right, was left with little room for manoeuvre and feared a repeat of its poor performance in the regional elections. As well as the question of the balance of power within the parliamentary right between itself and the UDF, the UMP had other domestic or internal issues to confront, including the fate of the prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and the choice of a successor to the party's president, Alain Juppé, following his conviction in January for presiding over illegal party funding in the 1980s and 1990s. Chirac's strategy was therefore one of damage limitation on two fronts: firstly, to contain the ambitions of the charismatic and popular¹⁰ Sarkozy to become prime minister and UMP president, and secondly to protect himself and his government from the fallout from the poor result anticipated. He and his ministers consequently kept a very low profile throughout the campaign, limiting their engagements and letting Juppé front the campaign. Expectations were kept low by insisting that any improvement on the party's abysmal showing in 1999 (12.8% achieved by a list led by Sarkozy) would be deemed a success¹¹ and that whatever the outcome, Raffarin would remain prime minister to see the social reform programme through parliament, despite his evident unpopularity.

The PS strategy was two-pronged. Its 'social Europe' campaign was tied in with domestic social issues and the national debate on reforms in France, but it also made explicit calls for a protest vote against Raffarin. The campaign was slightly derailed by the intense controversy and media coverage which surrounded the gay marriage performed in his mayoral capacity by the Greens' 2002 presidential candidate, Noël Mamère, which was criticised by Lionel Jospin, as well as speculation about Jospin's return to French political life.

On the far left, the LCR and LO, while still trying to project two distinct identities, maintained their alliance strategy despite winning less than 5% in the regional elections. They congratulated themselves on having created a political 'micro-climate' and anticipated winning back the working class vote on the strength of opposition to the health insurance reforms. Proposed lists to be presented by Attac, the anti-globalisation movement, did not materialise and were highly contentious within the organisation given its non-political status.

Polls during the two months preceding the elections put the PS in the lead and the UMP ahead of the other centre-right party, the UDF, with the FN at various times in third or fourth position. Predictions made earlier in the year that the mainstream parties would find it hard to win support and voters would turn to extreme groups at both ends of the political spectrum were adjusted in the light of the March regional election results in which the mainstream parties won almost three quarters of the vote.

The strongly Eurosceptic or Europhile parties appeared to have most success in mobilising their potential electorate: 62% of MPF supporters and 58% of UDF supporters said that they were definitely going to vote, compared with 46% for the electorate as a whole.

¹⁰ A Louis Harris post-election poll (13 June 2004) put Sarkozy's popularity rating with all voters at 34% and with UMP/UDF voters at 57%, compared with Raffarin's ratings of 8% and 13% respectively.

¹¹ A UMP spokesman said: "14% would be a victory, 15% a triumph, 16% ecstasy, and beyond that, I don't know".

Brief analysis of the results

Table 1: Results of the French elections to the European Parliament June 2004

Party ¹²	2004		1999		Change 1999/2004	
	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats
PS	28.89	31	21.95	22	+6.94	+9
UMP/RPR	16.64	17	12.82	12	+3.82	+5
UDF	11.95	11	9.28	9	+2.67	+2
FN	9.81	7	5.69	5	+4.12	+2
Les Verts	7.40	6	9.72	9	-2.32	-13
MPF-RPF	8.37	3	13.05	13	-4.68	-10
PC	5.24	3	6.80	6	-1.56	-3
LO-LCR	2.56	0	5.18	5	-2.6	-5
CPNT	1.73	0	6.77	6	-5.04	-6
MNR	0.31	0	3.28	0	-2.97	-
Others	7.10	0	5.48	0	+1.62	-
Total	100	78	100	87		

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

With 28.89% of the vote, the PS won a resounding victory, coming first in all the metropolitan constituencies and repeating its success in the regional elections, with its best-ever result in a European election. Given its disastrous performance in 2002, the party has made an impressive comeback to reclaim first place on the French political scene. The combined vote for the Greens and the PC was 12.64%, compared with 16.52% in 1999. For the Greens, this was a disappointing result given the very positive European line they had taken, but it was the second party of the left. The Communists vote of 5.25% was less than the 6.78% won under the leadership of Robert Hue list in 1999 but they could take some consolation from the fact that they polled twice as many votes as the Trotskyist LCR-LO.

The governing UMP came second with 16.64%, only a 3% improvement on their abysmal 1999 result. Nevertheless, this result enabled the party to claim success on two counts: firstly, because this time they polled more than the Eurosceptic right, and secondly because they maintained their dominance of the centre-right. The UDF vote was up by 2.7% on its 1999 result and Bayrou's strategy of maintaining an independent line from the UMP was vindicated. Chirac and Juppé's party has failed to achieve either of the objectives which it set itself when it was formed in November

¹² PS: Parti socialiste (Socialist Party)

UMP: Union pour un mouvement populaire (Union for a Popular Movement), formerly the

RPR: Rassemblement pour la République (Rally for the Republic)

UDF: Union pour la démocratie française (Union for French Democracy)

FN: Front national (National Front)

Les Verts: The Greens

MPF: Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France)

RPF: Rassemblement pour la France (Rally for France)

PC: Parti communiste (Communist Party)

LO: Lutte ouvrière (Workers' Struggle)

LCR: Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Communist Revolutionary League)

CPNT: Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions (Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Traditions)

MNR: Mouvement national républicain (National Republican Movement)

2002: it has neither become the only party of the centre right nor an 'election-winning machine', having been defeated in every election since its creation. As such, the result has to be seen as a failure for the president, his party and his prime minister.

The protest vote

Previous European elections have not been used to make a protest vote against the government and in fact the governing parties have normally performed well. This time was clearly different and the main beneficiary of the tactical vote against the UMP was the PS, who had indeed specifically campaigned for it.

Although this was the last opportunity for the electorate to give its verdict on the government until 2007, it was not seized with the same enthusiasm as the regional elections, which had enabled the voters to voice their feelings and consequently taken the edge off the protest vote. Yet once again, the electorate expressed its unhappiness both with the social reform programme and the fact that the prime minister had not been replaced despite his party's poor performance in the regional elections and the lack of confidence that he inspired.

The peripheral parties

However, this protest vote was not channelled through the minor parties as it had been in the 2002 presidential election and, with the exception of the FN, there was a decline in support for the extremes on the right and left. Aggregate support for the three main parties (UMP, UDF, PS) actually rose, from 44.05% in 1999 to 57.48% in 2004. The new voting system favoured the bigger parties, whose representation in the European Parliament went up disproportionately, from 43 to 59 seats. Although the parliamentary left was ahead of the parliamentary right, the right (with 48.81%) dominated the left (44.09%) in the overall balance of political forces. The FN came either third or fourth in all but one of the metropolitan constituencies, and where it came fourth the Eurosceptic MPF came third. The continued strength of the FN confirms the tripartition of the French political space between the centre left, centre right and far right.

Support for the MPF and RPF was down by almost 5%, in elections which traditionally favour them. Pasqua lost his seat in the European Parliament (and along with it his immunity from prosecution for involvement in various scandals). The FN's 9.81% was an improvement on its 1999 result (5.69%) but that had been achieved at a time when the party was seriously weakened by the split which led to Bruno Mégret forming the MNR. They fell 4 seats short of the 11 won in 1994 and Le Pen himself acknowledged that the result was disappointing. Nonetheless, the FN vote has held up well and neither the UMP nor the sovereignists have managed to eat into it. The MNR vote, on the other hand, collapsed, down from 3.3% in 1999 to 0.3%.

On the far left, the LCR and LO's combined share of the vote was 2.56%, half the 1999 figure and their lowest point since that year. They won no seats and even failed to reach the 3% threshold necessary for the reimbursement of their campaign costs. They may have paid a high price for maintaining their alliance strategy and were perceived as arrogant and sectarian, attacking all the other parties with equal belligerence.

The reversal of a trend towards support for peripheral parties which was a characteristic of French voting behaviour in the 1990s, and which was evident in other EU countries in these elections, may be attributable to the trauma of the 2002 presidential election. This has made the left-wing electorate wary of dispersing its vote among the smaller parties, preferring to vote tactically, and has led to a greater discipline which has benefited the PS. The voting system introduced this year also gives the bigger parties an advantage, since the more votes polled above 5%, the greater the number of seats allocated.

While the decision of the RPF and MPF not to run in the regional elections may have put them at a disadvantage compared with the other parties coming into the June elections, the decline in support for the Eurosceptic parties in general seems to be a reflection of stronger support for the EU than in 1999, with three-quarters of voters prioritising support for the opposition's pro-European position and only a third feeling that European integration constituted a significant threat to French identity.¹³

Turnout

Table 2 Turnout in French Elections 1979-2004

as % of registered electorate¹⁴

	European	Presidential	Parliamentary	Regional
1979	60.7			
1981		81.1	70.9	
1984	56.7			
1986			78.5	77.9
1988		81.4	65.7	
1989	48.8			
1992				68.6
1993			69.2	
1994	52.7			
1995		78.4		
1997			68.3	
1998				58.0
1999	46.7			
2002		71.6	64.4	
2004	42.8			62.2

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

Turnout for European elections in France is always lower than for any other type of election but this time, at 42.8%, it hit an all-time low and was almost 20% less than for the regional elections in March. Indeed, the closeness of these two elections was inevitably a major factor in reducing the level of participation, and media interest was also on the wane. On election night, television coverage of the results on the most popular channel, TF1, was squeezed in between the Canadian Grand Prix and the

¹³ According to an IPSOS eve of election poll.

¹⁴ % vote in the first round for 2-round elections.

France v England football match which opened Euro 2004. Campaigning had been low-key and lacklustre and almost three-quarters of voters in the Louis Harris post-election poll said that they felt the leaders of the major parties did not really campaign or clearly put across their positions on Europe. During the campaign, while all the parties referred to the importance of raising awareness of the EU, each blamed the others for not doing so and for the lack of debate. The regional constituencies may have played a role here by making it more difficult to organise debate at a national level but the parties' failure to mobilise the electorate was certainly a factor in the low turnout, with the government in particular keeping a very low profile.

Having had the opportunity to vent their feelings in March, voters were less motivated to turn out again so soon, particularly since the message they had sent to the government appeared to have been ignored. The impression was given that the prime minister would not be replaced whatever the outcome and that the really important event in the political calendar would be the UMP congress in November to elect Juppé's successor as party president. Internal party politics seemed to count for more than the wishes of the electorate.

Abstention, then, served as an alternative form of protest vote and an expression of the voters' sense of impotence and frustration, and their lack of confidence in the political elite's ability to counteract the continuing deterioration in the economic and social situation in France. Less than a quarter of working class voters and the under-35s turned out. 21% of those who abstained said that this had been because voting would not change anything and another 21% thought that voting would not resolve French society's current problems.¹⁵ These domestic factors were more important than lack of clarity about European issues (cited by 14%) or the weakness of the European parliament (9%).

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The French vote in the 2004 European elections was characterised by a record low turnout, an unprecedentedly high vote for the PS in this type of election and a protest vote against the party in power. The PS was the conduit chosen to convey two key messages to the government. Firstly, the electorate wanted priority to be given to social issues, in particular employment, pensions and the health service. The second message was one of dissatisfaction with the prime minister in particular and a sense of frustration with the political elite in general.

What do these elections say about the state of the parties? The PS' triumph conceals a lack of unity among the parties of the left and their leader Hollande's call for a 'new alliance' has been ignored. The PS has to confront a number of questions in the aftermath of the elections: about its hegemony on the left and the impact of this on its relationship with the Greens and the PCF; about its own internal divisions and the influence of the minor factions in the party; and about its choice of presidential candidate for 2007 and the future role of Lionel Jospin, who made a number of (not always helpful) appearances and interventions during the campaign.

¹⁵ Louis Harris poll, 13 June 2004.

The UMP's handling of the European elections did not reflect well on the French President, prime minister or government. Outperformed by the Socialists, they also failed either to unite or dominate the centre-right, and seemed prepared to ignore the public mood. Nonetheless, their substantial majority in parliament puts the party in a strong position to carry through its social security reform programme. Technically, there is no reason for the European election results to require a change of prime minister, but there is a real danger that public discontent will be channelled into strikes and demonstrations. Raffarin's weak position also has a destabilising effect on the UMP while the obvious contender to succeed him and Juppé, Nicolas Sarkozy, remains a thorn in Chirac's side.

The political parties' now have their sights set on the 2007 presidential elections. The run-up to these will impose more internal pressure on both the PS and the UMP as competition among the rivals for their party's presidential nomination intensifies. In the wider political context, a decision will have to be taken sooner or later about holding a referendum on the constitutional treaty. The French position on Turkish membership of the EU will also need to be clarified and this has the potential to open up a new cleavage on Europe.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>