

EUROPE AND THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS OF APRIL/MAY AND JUNE 2002

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Key points:

- The outcome of the first round of the presidential election (21 April) was an unexpected duel between far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and presidential incumbent Jacques Chirac. Chirac was re-elected in the second round (5 May) with 82.1% of the vote.
- The two-round legislative elections (9 June and 16 June) gave Chirac's party,

Union Pour la Majorité Présidentielle (UMP), an absolute majority in the National Assembly, in which it now holds 70% of the seats.

- Europe barely figured in either of the election campaigns.
- The presidential election saw a record sixteen candidates run for office.
- The first round of the presidential election, as well as both rounds of the legislatives, saw record abstention rates.

Introduction

For a month-and-a-half France was on an electoral roller coaster. Contrary to all expectations and predictions, the presidential election witnessed the defeat of the left's main candidate caused by the rise of both the extreme right and the extreme left. The subsequent round gave a president once weakened by corruption scandals and the absence of a parliamentary majority the opportunity to be elected with a record 82% of the vote, and his party went on to claim an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly a few weeks later. The paradox is that such upheaval took place in the

context, and possibly as a result of, an uneventful period of cohabitation. This electoral outcome, particularly for the left, is one that requires closer examination. How can one explain the failure of the Jospin government to measure the discontent in the French population? How can one explain the presence of Jean Marie Le Pen as a challenger to Chirac in the second round of the presidential election? And, finally, how can one explain the overwhelming endorsement of Chirac's new party, the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (UMP) in the legislative contest, given his own poor showing in the first round of the presidential election (less than 20% of the vote)?

Unlike other French elections to have taken place in the past decade, none of these questions can be answered by looking at the European issue and its role in the two election campaigns. These questions can, however, be answered by looking at two main areas: the context of cohabitation and the nature of French institutions; and the content of the election campaigns themselves.

Cohabitation

The context of cohabitation explains a number of things. To begin with, it brings into clear focus the dynamics of the French presidential election by highlighting institutional paradoxes. The respective roles of the prime minister and the president are not particularly clearly defined in the French Constitution of 1958. Much of the practice has been dependent on the president's own interpretation of his powers, and the 1962 amendment, by conferring popular legitimacy upon the president, heightens the dilemma of 'who governs?' The various spells of cohabitation in France (1986–8; 1993–15 and, finally, 1997–2002) have strengthened the already existing belief that prime ministers who run for president are not successful. This is because they are associated strictly with the less-than-glamorous realm of domestic politics and thus perceived as mired in the day-to-day politics of the nation. Further, they are linked to the National Assembly – a body which has increasingly been bypassed by the executive and, in particular, by the president (regardless of the balance of power). The prime minister is thus not generally perceived as 'présidentiable' i.e. able to 'rise' above their party to represent the French nation. In Jospin's case this was made all the more problematic by his political image: one of austerity and moral superiority – hard-working but dull – an image which, given the highly media-orientated nature of the presidential race, did not fare well in comparison to Chirac's larger-than-life image.

Further, cohabitation proved challenging in terms of

maintaining the left-wing coalition in the Assembly (La Gauche Plurielle) which brought together greens, socialists and independent social democrats. Indeed, cohabitation created a set of dynamics which were destined to put pressure on the coalition.

Disagreements were more likely to arise given the necessity to navigate the treacherous waters of power-sharing, and these disagreements were made all the more problematic by the absence of a united and supportive executive. This, together with Jospin's rather obvious lack of 'the common touch', explains the number of independent left-wing candidates who chose to run in the first round of the presidential elections and effectively robbed Jospin of the 200,000 votes he needed to be present in the second round.

The context of cohabitation seems even more crucial in explaining the rest of the story, namely Le Pen's success, the popular and political mobilization that occurred between the two rounds and the right's victory in the legislative elections.

Clearly, Le Pen's vote increased. While he had consistently polled between 12 and 15% of the vote in various elections since the late 1980s, his presence in the second round of the presidential election came as thunderbolt. Written off after the party split in 1998, the Front National made a quite spectacular comeback. In terms of numbers, the score was perhaps not so spectacular: there was an increase in support to the tune of an extra 1 million votes for Le Pen. But it is arguable that Le Pen's presence in the second round had more to do with Jospin being a mere 200,000 votes short rather than a spectacular showing on the part of the former.

Nevertheless, Le Pen's success (whether new or not) sheds some light on the effects of cohabitation in France and versions of coalition government in general. What is quite clear is that the long period of cohabitation – which inevitably gave the impression of, if not of a happy partnership, then certainly of a working partnership – played directly into the hands of Le Pen's populist rhetoric. What better way to illustrate that the common people were governed by a corrupt and collusive elite than to point to two sworn enemies managing to govern together? This is the sort of 'carve-up' that serves as the basis of populism: an elite seemingly willing to make whatever compromise is necessary in order to remain in power and govern at the expense of the 'people'. Add to this the personalities of an intellectual and an alledged crook and the balance is bound to shift, partly, in favour of the man perceived as able to transcend the politicking and reconnect with those who have been helplessly watching the double-act from the sidelines. The cocktail is all the more explosive since policy failure in this context is interpreted as a double failure: 'two

heads' and still no solution to what are perceived as the problems of day-to-day life. The context of cohabitation in France, coalition government in Austria, the politics of compromise and the Polder model in the Netherlands have all delivered stability and prosperity. They have also blurred cleavage-lines and can be held somewhat responsible for an increased willingness to vote for both extremes of the spectrum, but in particular for the populist far right. In France the total vote for the far right in the first round of the presidential elections was 19.2% and for the far left 10.4%.

The scare provoked by Le Pen's vote, the collective dismay at the absence of a 'real' choice in the second round and the sense (however intuitive) that the past five years of cohabitation had led to this appalling result explains, to a great extent, Chirac's artificially inflated support in the second round. It also accounts for the electorate's unwillingness to take any chances on another cohabitation during the legislative election. Once Chirac was elected president, therefore, it seemed the only campaign available was one against cohabitation. The French electorate drew lessons from the presidential election and reluctantly dragged itself to the polling booths to give Chirac's new political grouping a clear majority in the National Assembly.

The campaigns and the (non-appearance of) the European issue

The campaigns themselves were another important area of inquiry that, particularly in hindsight, yield a number of important explanations regarding both the dynamics of the elections as well as their results.

The first noteworthy element here concerns what the both the national and international media saw as the extraordinary banality of the presidential campaign. The French presidential elections have long been considered the nation's biggest and most important electoral contest and the campaign has traditionally reflected this central role. This year, however, saw a remarkably lacklustre and uneventful set of campaigns. Perhaps this also needs to be placed in the context of cohabitation. Had the presidential race been downgraded by the systemic effects of cohabitation? Had the institutional arrangements characteristic of the past five years harmed the prestige of the presidency to the point of eclipsing the campaign? Perhaps. What is for sure is that both the record number of candidates (spanning the entire political spectrum) and the, obviously mistaken, sense that a Chirac-Jospin duel in the second round was inevitable conspired to drain the campaign of both style and substance.

More importantly, it is quite clear that the campaign themes were, in large part, dictated by the dynamics of cohabitation. Five years of governing together robbed Jospin and Chirac of any critical edge, and indeed of the distance necessary for adversarial politics. Further, cohabitation, and the constitutional provisions upon which it rests, created a situation in which foreign policy, including European affairs, is disputed territory – thus leading in this case to an almost exclusively domestic focus. Domestic politics allowed Chirac to be 'presidential' and rise above the Jospin government, and because domestic issues were also both the undisputed territory and the balance sheet of the Jospin government they became what appeared to be the safest battleground.

This points to one of the most relevant aspects of the campaign: the absence of the European issue. No one in the campaign (presidential or legislative) made much of it. Although Chirac hinted at a more nationalistic approach were he to be elected (and much of this has been reinforced by the recent Seville summit), both Chirac and Jospin were perceived as broadly pro-Europe and as having presided over the introduction of the euro. Since neither candidate addressed the issue directly, neither did France's characteristically deferential media – and, thus, neither did the electorate. Even for a candidate such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose strident anti-Europeanism is well known and whose previous campaigns bore the dual stamp of an anti-immigration and an anti-European stance, this issue came well after law and order (also top of the agenda for Chirac, who was accused of running Le Pen's campaign by making so much of it), fiscal reform and the tightening of immigration laws. It is arguable that in the rhetoric of the FN, and particularly that of Le Pen, the themes of immigration, law and order and Europe are tightly interwoven and that to allude to one automatically alludes to the others. Nevertheless Le Pen's anti-Europeanism was muted: his traditional references to the Europe of technocrats and 'federasts', over-bureaucratization and the incompetence of Brussels all but disappeared from his speeches (though traces remained in the programmes). They were replaced simply by the assertion, but almost made in passing, that he would pull France out of the euro.

On 24 April, between the two rounds of the elections, Le Pen visited Brussels. As he entered the European Parliament, MEPs stood up and jeered; but he nevertheless took the opportunity to address France's role in the EU and tone down his radical anti-Europeanism. Whereas he had maintained throughout the campaign leading up to the first round that he would pull France out of European institutions, in Brussels he argued that this would not be the case.

Membership of the EU held advantages that he would not let France forfeit. Indeed, France's presence in the Union was necessary and beneficial to the EU itself.

The campaign prior to the first round revolved almost exclusively around issues of law and order (this was not helped by the murder of eight people in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, not long before the election). Opinion polls showed that the European issue came a distant fourth in the preoccupations of those who voted for Le Pen in the first round (well after law and order, immigration and unemployment), whereas in 1995 and 1988 the FN's anti-European stance was key to attracting voters. The only candidates to take up the anti-European cause were those on the extreme left whose revolutionary rhetoric and objectives left little room for supranational issues. Arlette Laguillier (of the workers' party Force Ouvrière) and the candidate for the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire both condemned Europe as representing capitalist exploitation.

If Europe barely figured prior to the first round of the presidential election, the campaign itself barely figured thereafter! Given the duel between Chirac and Le Pen, the traditional 'inter-round' campaign was replaced by mass mobilization against Le Pen. This mobilization allowed Chirac not to campaign at all and cornered Jospin (however reluctantly) into calling upon the left to support 'the Republic' against Le Pen in the second round. The hiatus between the two rounds usually sees the two candidates go into campaign overdrive and, finally, spell out the differences between their respective programmes. This time the campaigning was replaced by mass protest (sometimes verging on the hysterical), much brow-beating and finger-pointing and a wave of institutional analyses deriding a Fifth Republican system capable of producing such grotesque election results. Chirac, unsurprisingly, was re-elected with 82% of the vote (a result which Le Pen characterized as 'Soviet style'!).

The effects of the presidential election were immediately felt in the legislative election campaign. Here, too, campaigning all but disappeared. The analyses of the institutional problems created by cohabitation and the sense in which another spell of cohabitation might further strengthen the FN led Chirac to concentrate exclusively on asking the electorate to give him a majority. The left, on the other

hand, desperately tried to give the electorate one good reason why they might wish to vote for another period of cohabitation. Law and order once again dominated the agenda, with Chirac pointing to the measures already put in place since the presidential contest and assuring the French that he 'had understood' their concerns. But what characterized the legislative contest was, above all, the complete absence of any real campaign.

The results confirmed Chirac's presidential victory. Whether or not his legitimacy remains questionable (given the nature of his re-election as president), his UMP party holds an absolute majority in the National Assembly, with 369 of its 577 seats. Chirac finally finds himself in a position to govern, something he had forfeited in 1997.

Conclusion

Europe's conspicuous absence in the campaigns leading up to both the presidential and legislative elections was remarked upon by analysts and journalists alike. In an interview with *Le Monde*, European Commissioner Pascal Lamy commented that cohabitation had reduced the scope of debate to a few issues of no real consequence; thus the thorny issue of Europe (and the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy) was too controversial for either mainstream candidate caught in this particular institutional conundrum. For Le Pen, two factors might explain the demotion of his anti-European stance. The first is that in the recent past, Le Pen's relationship with the institutions of Europe has been turbulent. Having lost his MEP status and somewhat sullied his image in the European Parliament, he might have been advised to distance himself from the European arena. A second, and perhaps more important, reason is that he may simply (in his characteristically prescient way) have detected early on in the campaign that Europe was not going to be picked up by the two mainstream candidates. There was, to put it bluntly, no mileage in the issue. Polls reveal that the French electorate, much as his own constituency, was more interested in other issues, and particularly law and order, over which Le Pen knew that he could run a more credible campaign.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, FIRST ROUND, 21 APRIL 2002

Candidate	Number of votes	% of vote
M. CHIRAC Jacques – RPR	5,665,855	19.88
M. LE PEN Jean-Marie – FN	4,804,713	16.86
M. JOSPIN Lionel – Parti Socialiste	4,610,113	16.18
M. BAYROU François – UDF	1,949,170	6.84
Mme LAGUILLER Arlette – LO	1,630,045	5.72
M. CHEVENEMENT Jean-Pierre	1,518,528	5.33
M. MAMERE Noël	1,495,724	5.25
M. BESANCENOT Olivier	1,210,562	4.25
M. SAINT-JOSSE Jean – CPNT	1,204,689	4.23
M. MADELIN Alain	1,113,484	3.91
M. HUE Robert – Parti Communiste	960,480	3.37
M. MEGRET Bruno – FNMR	667,026	2.34
Mme TAUBIRA Christine	660,447	2.32
Mme LEPAGE Corinne	535,837	1.88
Mme BOUTIN Christine	339,112	1.19
M. GLUCKSTEIN Daniel	132,686	0.47

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, SECOND ROUND, 5 MAY 2002

Candidate	Number of votes	% of vote
M. Jacques CHIRAC	25,537,956	82.21
M. Jean-Marie LE PEN	5,525,032	17.79

LEGISLATIVE ELECTION, FIRST ROUND, 9 JUNE 2002

Political affiliation	Number of votes	% of vote
Abstentions :	14 578 609	35.58 %
LO - Lutte Ouvrière	301,984	1.20
LCR - Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire	320,467	1.27
Extrême gauche	81,558	0.32
PCF - Parti communiste	1,216,178	4.82
PS - Parti Socialiste	6,086,599	24.11
PRG - Parti Radical de gauche	388,891	1.54
Divers gauche	275,553	1.09
Verts	1,138,222	4.51
Pôle Républicain	299,897	1.19
Autres écologistes	295,899	1.17
Régionalistes	66,240	0.26
CPNT – Chasse Pêche Nature Traditions	422,448	1.67
Divers	194,946	0.77
UMP - Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle	8,408,023	33.30
UDF - Union pour la Démocratie française	1,226,462	4.85
DL – Démocratie Libérale	104,767	0.41
RPF – Rassemblement pour la France	94,222	0.37
MPF- Mouvement pour la France	202,831	0.80
Divers droite	921,973	3.65
FN - Front National	2,862,960	11.34
MNR – Mouvement National Républicain	276,376	1.09
Ext.Droite	59,549	0.24

LEGISLATIVE ELECTION, SECOND ROUND, 16 JUNE 2002

Political affiliation	Abstentions	14,597,581	39.68 %	
		Number of votes	% of votes	Seats
PCF - Parti communiste		690,807	3.26	21
PS - Parti Socialiste		7,482,169	35.26	138
PRG - Parti Radical de gauche		455,360	2.15	7
Divers gauche		268,715	1.27	6
Verts		677,933	3.19	3
Pôle Républicain		12,679	0.06	0
Régionalistes		28,689	0.14	1
Divers		13,036	0.06	1
UMP - Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle		10,029,669	47.26	309
UDF - Union pour la Démocratie française		832,785	3.92	23
RPF - Rassemblement pour la France		61,605	0.29	2
Divers droite		274,374	1.29	8
FN - Front National		393,205	1.85	0

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