

Disaffection with major parties dominates French presidential elections

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17 April 2002

On April 21, the first round of the presidential elections takes place in France. Two weeks later, on May 5, the two best-placed candidates face a run-off ballot. In all probability, this will be between the Gaullist incumbent Jacques Chirac and the sitting prime minister, Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin.

The two are engaged in a head-to-head race, which is characterised by the absence of any serious clashes of political opinion. Opinion polls record that 75 percent of respondents regard the programmes of Chirac and Jospin as “almost identical” and 60 percent do not yet know who they will vote for in the second round. Even the election slogans are interchangeable: While Chirac advocates “a united France”, Jospin calls for “France and the French to be united.”

Jospin’s carefully cultivated image of being a leftwing socialist, with which he won the snap parliamentary election called by Chirac five years ago, has largely been abandoned. After announcing his candidacy, Jospin stressed that although he was “inspired by socialism”, his programme, on the other hand, was not a socialist one, but was “modern” and “in the centre ground”. Three years ago, Jospin distanced himself from British premier Tony Blair and German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder when they adopted a common economic programme, saying his own political credo could be summed up with the words, “Yes to the free-market economy, no to market society.” Today Jospin has largely adopted Blair and Schroeder’s vocabulary.

The central election campaign topic is domestic security. Jospin now offers exactly the same response as Chirac to the social misery in France’s many *banlieues*, or suburbs. Both candidates plan to create a super-ministry for domestic security. Jospin even endorses the imprisonment of 10-year-olds, if they come into conflict with the law.

“The 1945 regulation is not a taboo,” he said, referring to the law preventing the arrest of those under 13 years old and which prescribes educational measures rather than punishment. For some time, a law commission has been seeking to lower the age of criminal responsibility to 10 years old; a measure proposed by Jean Pierre Chevènement, Jospin’s former friend and interior minister, but who today is his rival for the presidency.

Jospin has been very sparing with his social promises. He wants to lower the number of unemployed from the present level of 2.4 million to 900,000 in five years. He also wants to improve education possibilities for young people. And that is it. There is no more talk of wide-ranging reform measures to resolve France’s urgent social problems.

Other burning problems, like French participation in the war in Afghanistan, the Middle East conflict and the attitude towards European Union, are not being addressed at all in the election campaign. Both camps are deeply divided over the question of Europe, and a clear statement by either candidate could lead to a break-up.

In view of the absence of any serious political differences, personal attacks are dominating the campaign. The rightwing point the finger at Jospin’s Trotskyist past, while the left reproaches Chirac for his

involvement in the Paris corruption scandal—but not too loudly, since the Socialist Party is also deeply implicated in several corruption scandals.

There is a vast gulf between the election campaigns of the two leading candidates and the problems affecting the mass of the voters. The limited support for the leading candidates is also expressed by the fact that there are more candidates for the first ballot than ever before. Of four dozen original contenders, 16 have overcome the difficult hurdles that French electoral law sets each prospective candidate—the need to gain the signature of 500 elected representatives from 30 different *départments* (administrative regions).

The high polling of Arlette Laguiller, the candidate of Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) has drawn much media attention. She has regularly received over 10 percent in opinion polls. Laguiller calls herself a Trotskyist. Although the political programme she advances shares little in common with the conceptions of the founder the Fourth International, the relatively high level of support for a candidate who is generally regarded as a follower of Leon Trotsky is nevertheless a clear expression of the search for a leftwing political alternative. Beside Laguiller there are two additional candidates who call themselves Trotskyists—Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League) and Daniel Gluckstein of the Parti des Travailleurs (PT, Workers Party).

Similar poll ratings as Laguiller are also being registered for Jean Pierre Chevènement, of the Republican Pole. Chevènement, who resigned in protest from the Jospin government because of it having made concessions to Corsican autonomy, defends French sovereignty as a bulwark against globalisation, the European Union and the influence of the United States.

On the extreme right, Jean Marie Le Pen of the National Front is also recording a rating of approximately 10 percent, even though he lost control of the greater part of his organisation at the end of 1998 and his rival at that time, Bruno Mégret, is also seeking the extreme right vote.

Communist Party candidate Robert Hue, one of Jospin’s coalition partners, has only received a five to six percent rating, a historical low. The Green candidate Noel Mamère has recorded about six to eight percent.

It already looks like the future president will receive only about a fifth of the votes in the first ballot. The lack of popularity of the two main rivals can largely be attributed to the fact that they have co-operated closely for five years within the context of the *cohabitation* (where the president and prime minister come from opposing parties) and despite occasional friction, form a sort of grand coalition.

Chirac’s premature dissolution of parliament in 1997, which helped bring the Socialist Party back into government, is regarded as his greatest political mistake. But it was not. A year beforehand, Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé, despite an overwhelming parliamentary majority, had proved unable to break the resistance of millions of working people against the substantial reduction of social rights. A general strike and a

protest wave had paralysed the country for weeks. Chirac needed a new mandate for his government from the electorate, or a new “left” government was needed that could count on the support of the trade union bureaucracy and among the working class and so would encounter less resistance.

Jospin fulfilled these expectations. For five years, he proved to the French bourgeoisie that he knew how to protect their interests. His government, the so-called *Gauche Plurielle* (plural left), which beside the Socialist Party also contains the Communist Party, the Greens, the Radical Socialists and the Citizens Block of Chevènement, has pushed through policies which their conservative predecessors proved incapable of doing.

It has transformed the army from one based on general conscription into a professional body and has sent French soldiers into the Balkans and to participate in the Afghanistan war.

According to a report in *Le Monde*, it privatised state-owned enterprises with a value of 31 billion euros (\$26.3 billion), a figure far higher than Jospin’s Gaullist predecessors, Edouard Balladur (17 billion euro) and Alain Juppé (9.4 billion euro), put together. The conservative Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* commented appreciatively: “France is no longer a state holding enterprise with a highly regulated and protected economy. Today, [French] industry is largely denationalised... It was precisely this government of the socialists, which to a greater extent than any government before it, advanced privatisation energetically and opened France to the world market. In so doing, it adhered more or less to the prescriptions of the preceding rightwing governments.”

The employers’ association Medef has already let it be known that in its view, Jospin is by no means the worse choice as president. Medef has posed a clear set of demands to all the parties in these elections, arguing that the reform of the tri-partite unemployed, sickness and pension insurance schemes—the so-called *refondation sociale*—should be accelerated and complemented by a *refondation juridique*, a programme of legal reforms to expand business freedom and flexibility. The employers want to be able to decide freely, and without state interference, such issues as working hours, conditions and wages.

Several times, Jospin has signalled his agreement. In a book published at the beginning of the election campaign, under the title *Time to Answer*, he regrets that his government had the tendency, “to want too much legal regulation and not leave enough to concluding contracts.” On March 18, when publishing his programme, he said: “I want our country, and particularly the left, to leave more space for what is called social democracy, i.e. for negotiation and agreeing contracts.”

Jospin has succeeded in winning a considerable number of intellectuals, actors, writers and sports personalities to his campaign. A thousand prominent public figures have expressed their support for him in an open letter, including Jeanne Moreau, Chiara Mastroianni, Michel Piccoli, Jorge Semprun and Mazarine Pingeot, the daughter of former president Mitterrand. As far as the working class and poorer social layers are concerned, however, Jospin has lost a large part of his support.

Since 1997, both the unemployed and undocumented immigrants, the *Sans-papiers*, have protested against his broken election promises. There have been occupations and actions against closures and dismissals, which have increasingly been directed against the government. Today, hardly a day passes without strikes and protests taking place, which have taken quite desperate forms in some cases. At Moulinex, workers set their own factory ablaze; at Cellatex staff poured sulphuric acid into the local river, and at Heineken in Schiltigheim, brewery workers threatened to blow up their factory. These are all signs of a spreading feeling of deep frustration and hopelessness.

In the public service—on the railways and Paris metro, at the post office, in schools and hospitals—there have been repeated strikes against the government and its attacks on social gains.

Jospin’s showcase project, the 35-hour-week, has for a large section of

those affected, led to more stress (in the absence of additional jobs being created, as was promised) and smaller pay packets (through the loss of overtime and other bonuses). Furious hospital workers blocked the access to Jospin’s election meeting on April 8 in Riom near Clermont-Ferrand, calling for more jobs to be created as the 35-hour-week is implemented.

The social position of a large section of the French population has worsened in the past five years under Jospin. Although unemployment has fallen from 12 to nine percent between 1997 and 2001, the number of those in precarious employment, i.e. with short-term contracts and low paid jobs, has increased sharply. In March 2001, 2.2 million, i.e. nine percent of the working population, were employed in such precarious posts. The numbers of the working poor has risen to 850,000.

Since the beginning of 2001, unemployment has risen again. Seventeen percent of young people between 20 and 25 years of age are unemployed. In some suburbs, youth unemployment has reached 50 percent. Over four million people live in poverty, including 25 percent of all Maghreb immigrants in France.

According to a study of the National Association for the Prevention of Suicide, since 2000, suicide is the number one cause of death among young people aged between 25 and 34. Every 40 minutes a person kills himself in France. The suicide rate is 14 times higher among the unemployed than among those with jobs.

Jospin’s chances of an election victory mainly rest upon the fact that the incumbent, Jacques Chirac, is even more unpopular than he is. The many exposures of his involvement in corruption affairs are creating great difficulties for Chirac. Accusations against him cover illegal party financing, corruption, nepotism and election fraud. Shortly before the beginning of the election campaign, Chirac’s earlier confidante, Didier Schuller, the former boss of the Paris housing administration, came before the French courts and seriously implicated the Gaullists. Chirac has only escaped a trial so far due to his immunity as French president.

The satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* recently published details from an investigation conducted by the present Paris mayor, Bertrand Delanoë (Socialist Party), covering 1986-95, when Chirac held this office. According to Delanoë, the city treasury paid out some 2.14 million euros (\$1.9 million) for food, wine, tobacco and gifts for the personal consumption of the Chiracs. According to the accounts, they ordered fruit and vegetables worth 150 euro (\$132) every day.

Chirac’s party, the Gaullist RPR (Rassemblement pour la République, Assembly for the Republic) has been deeply divided for years. Only at the last minute did the Gaullist camp come together behind his candidacy in the newly created Union en mouvement (Union in movement), in order to increase his election chances.

Even in ruling circles, Chirac’s numerous affairs are regarded as a serious burden. The German newspaper *Die Welt* expressed an opinion that is common inside the French elite, when, in a comment headed “Monsieur Nepotism against Monsieur Trotsky” it came down in favour of Jospin. “In the long term, the ethical risk in leaving Jacques Chirac in office is greater than the political one of electing Lionel Jospin... The rampant cynicism regarding French politics—the view that all politicians are by definition corrupt and will remain so—causes far more damage to French democracy than the temptation to carry out a nostalgic socio-economic policy. The negative effect of this would, in any case, be limited by the European Union.”

Whoever enters the Elysée palace after May 5 will be confronted with turbulent developments. Under the surface of an apparently boring campaign, characterised by insignificant programmes and empty slogans, explosive social tensions are building up.



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