

The French presidential election: What the figures reveal

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Surveys published since the first round of voting in the French presidential election make possible a more precise analysis of the result, which allowed the neo-fascist National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen to emerge as the challenger in the second round to the current French president, Gaullist Jacques Chirac.

Taken as a whole, the election result expresses an enormous polarisation of French society. The two main bourgeois camps lost massive numbers of votes. In comparison to the first round of voting for the presidency in 1995, the right-wing camp of Jacques Chirac lost some four million votes, while the “plural left” of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (Socialist Party) lost 1.5 million.

Jospin himself received 2.5 million fewer votes than in 1995, but the bulk of this decline was accounted for by the separate candidacies of Jean-Pierre Chevenement (Republican Pole) and Christine Taboura (Left Radicals), who received 2.1 million votes combined. Each had supported the Socialist Party candidate in 1995. Another Jospin coalition partner, the Greens, saw its vote rise by about half a million. The Communist Party suffered a historic collapse, with its total cut by more than half, losing 1,640,000 votes compared to 1995.

The overall loss for the Socialist Party-led coalition was roughly equal to the gain by the candidates of far-left parties, who polled an additional 1.2 million votes as compared to 1995. In that year only the *Lutte Ouvrière* spokesperson Arlette Laguiller stood in the election. This year she was joined by two other candidates claiming to be Trotskyist—Olivier Besancenot of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*, and Daniel Gluckstein of the *Parti des Travailleurs*. Combined, the three obtained nearly 3 million votes.

The far-right parties showed an increase in their vote of just over 900,000. Le Pen’s second-place finish caused political shock waves, but his total vote actually rose by only 250,000 compared to 1995. His former ally Bruno Mégret, who split from the National Front in 1991 and ran for president for the first time, obtained 670,000 votes.

The far-right parties thus gained only about one quarter of the votes lost by the traditional right. The biggest increase was in the mass of abstainers, registered voters who did not go to the polls, whose numbers increased by three million compared to 1995. There was also a significant increase in the number of voters who went to the polls and refused to choose any of the 16 candidates, casting blank or spoiled ballots.

As one analyst in the social-democratic leaning newspaper

Liberation pointed out, the votes cast showed France divided into three nearly equal camps, each with 9-10 million votes: the “left” government camp of Prime Minister Jospin; the “right” government camp of President Chirac; and the anti-government camp of those who voted for either the neo-fascist right or the far left. Those not voting or spoiling their votes comprise an even larger camp, some 12 million.

Libération and the Louis Harris Institute carried out a survey on the day of the election based on a telephone poll of 2,175 persons. The figures are necessarily provisional, but they suggest certain conclusions about the social composition of the support for the different parties.

Jospin’s Socialist Party is a party of the middle class, not the workers. According to the *Libération* survey, the typical Jospin voter conforms to the following profile: male, 25 to 34 years old, employed as a middle- or senior-ranking supervisor or in a clerical position in the public service. He has graduated from high school and studied at the college level, and earns between 1,500 and 3,000 euros monthly. The rate of abstention is also highest in this category.

In contrast, Jospin received a smaller vote from those with lower incomes and less education, and, in general, from workers. In 1995, 25 percent of workers still voted for Jospin. This time the figure was only 12 percent. The bottom social layers turned their back on the Socialist Party and its governing coalition.

Those voting for Jacques Chirac were predominately from older, more conservative layers, especially in Paris and the more prosperous western half of France. Paris was the only region in the country where the governing coalition of Chirac and Jospin won more than 50 percent of the total vote. Le Pen and the far left both fared the worst in the nation’s capital.

Chirac won the votes of 31 percent of those over 65, but just 16 percent of those under 25. The last figure shows sharp disillusionment among young people with the corrupt and reactionary president. Seven years ago Chirac was able to win 29 percent of young voters.

In general, the breakdown of the vote by age bracket yields some remarkable contrasts: the two candidates in the May 5 runoff, Chirac and Le Pen, won 50 percent of the votes of the elderly, but only 25 percent of the votes of the youth. This is not surprising, given the efforts of all the bourgeois parties and the media to whip up fears of street crime and demonise youth and immigrants.

The voters for Le Pen come mainly from two different sections

of society, both socially and geographically. He was able to win the support of petty-bourgeois layers in backward rural areas, especially in eastern and southeastern France, where there is a long tradition of right-wing populism going back to the campaigns of Pierre Poujade in the 1950s (Le Pen began his political career as a Poujadist parliamentary deputy).

The other main source of new votes for Le Pen was dissatisfied blue collar workers, primarily older layers in the north and northeast, disproportionately affected by the shutdown of factories and mines over the past decade. Every fourth manual worker (26 percent) and 23 percent of voters with a monthly income below 1,500 euros voted for Le Pen. According to the survey: "This switch by ordinary and elderly voters to the *Front National* is the most important key to the party's electoral result."

Le Pen also received 32 percent of the votes of small tradesmen and artisans, many of whom voted in 1995 for the reactionary Philippe de Villiers, a former Chirac loyalist who broke with the Gaullists over European integration and campaigned for rejection of the Maastricht Treaty that created the European monetary union. De Villiers did not run this year, allowing Le Pen greater scope to profit from popular resentment over the consequences of European integration. (One study found that the anti-government vote, combining right and left, was most closely correlated with the vote against the Maastricht referendum.)

Le Pen also increased his vote from those living in working class and lower-middle-class suburbs plagued by social problems. In many such areas Le Pen came in first, ahead of Chirac and Jospin.

Relatively few votes for Le Pen came from the youth, with only 12 percent of all voters below the age of 25 supporting him. In contrast, his percentage among the age group above 65 more than doubled, rising from 9 percent to 19 percent.

Voters were asked which issues had prompted them to vote for Le Pen. For 73 percent, it was the question of law and order. For 30 percent, it was immigration. For 16 percent, the main issues were taxation, old-age pensions and unemployment. A third of all those who were asked said they had voted for Le Pen in order to express their disenchantment with the president or the prime minister.

The April 21 results were a debacle for the Communist Party. The PCF received only 3.4 percent of the vote, down from 8.6 percent in 1995. Its vote fell from 2.6 million to 960,000, by far the largest drop for any party, both in absolute and percentage terms. By falling below the 5 percent mark, the Stalinists lost eligibility to receive state subsidies for election campaign expenses and face a massive financial deficit.

Although both the LCR and the LO long ago abandoned any genuine allegiance to the revolutionary program of the Fourth International, it is nonetheless significant that these two organizations, claiming to be Trotskyist, each won more votes than the Stalinists. The total vote for the three parties identified publicly with Trotsky was three times the vote for the party which slavishly defended Stalin—a party which 20 years ago still commanded the loyalties of most politically active workers.

In many of the cities and working class suburbs long controlled by the PCF, the leading party in the April 21 vote was the National Front. This took place in Calais, the largest city with a PCF mayor,

and in several suburbs in the "red belt" surrounding Paris. The PCF presidential candidate, Robert Hue, first came to prominence two decades ago when, as mayor of one suburb, he led a vigilante attack on an immigrant workers' hostel, claiming it was a source of crime. The Stalinists thus led the way in disorienting French workers on the questions of crime and immigration, the very issues that Le Pen has now employed to demolish their parliamentary position.

Those who voted for the "extreme left" were concentrated, as with a section of Le Pen's supporters, in the large industrial areas that have been especially hard hit by the decline of mining, textiles and other branches of industry. In the old strongholds of the Communist and Socialist parties many voters expressed their protest by casting a ballot for parties further to the left or the right.

Libération asked workers at the gate of the Citroen car factory near Paris which issues had motivated their vote. Almost all of them expressed disgust with Jospin, saying they had had enough of his promises. The 35-hour week, they said, had led to an intensification of exploitation. Incomes had gone down, while flexible working conditions and insecurity had increased. Of three workers interviewed, who got on well together, one had voted for Le Pen, one for Laguiller and one for Chirac.

At a plant supplying parts to car factories, in the Vosges mountains in eastern France, a worker said that she had voted for Laguiller out of dissatisfaction with Jospin. Her 52-year-old colleague, however, has been voting for Le Pen for quite a while. "The left don't understand our problems," she said. "Today, they only represent the leading personnel. We don't count any longer."

These examples may be limited, but they do show that the election result is based neither on a misunderstanding, nor on some arithmetic fluke. The social contradictions, which find their sharpest expression in the unbearable conditions in the suburbs and the devastated industrial regions, have intensified to such a degree that they can no longer be contained within the framework of the traditional political mechanisms. The old parties and bourgeois institutions are no longer able to express the needs of broad layers of the population, or meet their expectations.

There are only two possible solutions to the crisis of bourgeois democratic institutions expressed in the election result: a right-wing, fascist outcome, as personified by Le Pen, or a left-wing, socialist one, which means that the working class takes the initiative to become the dominant force in society.

The fact that many workers expressed their protest against the establishment by voting for Le Pen shows that the central problem is the crisis of leadership and political perspective in the working class. The decades-long domination of the workers movement by Social Democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies has undermined the political consciousness of the working class. The only way to overcome this crisis is through the building of an independent party on the basis of an international, socialist perspective.



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