

French parliamentary elections: political right benefits from prostration of the left

Peter Schwarz
4 June 2002

The French National Assembly will be elected in two rounds on June 9 and June 16. All of the polls predict that Jacques Chirac, the Gaullist president who was reelected on May 5, will win a clear conservative majority in parliament. That would put him in a position to implement his right-wing program unhindered by opposition within parliament.

According to the polls, Chirac's conservative camp will capture 340 to 400 of the 577 National Assembly seats. The present left-wing majority is expected to win no more than 150 to 210 seats.

The projected difference in percentage for the first round of the election is less pronounced, but here too all of the polls put the conservative camp ahead of the parties of the left that made up the previous government. The conservatives are expected to win about 40 percent of the vote, while the left parties are projected to poll 35 to 38 percent. The extreme right stands at about 15 percent, the socialist left at 3 to 4 percent, and environmental parties that stand outside the main camps at 3 to 5 percent.

However, the election polls have proven to be quite unreliable. Prior to the presidential elections, no opinion poll predicted that the candidate of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, would make it into the second round. Furthermore, the French electoral system is prone to surprising results and is not conducive to precise predictions.

The seats are not allocated in proportion to the percentage of votes for a given party. Instead, one candidate is elected in every constituency. In contrast to Britain, however, where two or three parties dominate parliamentary elections, a great variety of parties put up candidates in France. This year, more than 8,400 candidates are competing for the 577 parliamentary seats—more than 14 per constituency, an historical record.

A candidate is elected in the first round if he receives more than 50 percent of the vote. In the second round, a plurality is sufficient. Only those candidates who receive more than 12.5 percent in the first round qualify for the second round. A second round candidate may, however, withdraw in order to boost the chances of another candidate.

This system fosters tactical deals and agreements between parties and candidates. It is in the parties' interest to form closely-knit blocks in the first round to achieve the 12.5 percent hurdle and put themselves in a strong position for the second round. The outcome of the second round is frequently decided by which candidates agree to withdraw.

In this regard the situation clearly favors the conservative camp. Chirac has made determined use of his success in the presidential election to unite the three right-wing parties—Gaullists (Rassemblement pour la République, or RPR), Liberal Democrats (Démocratie libérale, or DL) and Liberal Conservatives (Union pour la démocratie française, or UDF)—behind himself. As soon as his election victory became apparent, he founded a new block, the Union for a Presidential Majority (Union pour la majorité présidentielle, or UMP), that is now standing single conservative candidates in 536 constituencies. A section of the UDF did not join the UMP and is standing its own candidates in 130 constituencies.

The parliamentary left, despite calling itself the “united left,” enters the legislative elections in a state of fragmentation. There are only 34

constituencies with a joint candidate supported by all of the left parties. In another 130 constituencies there is a joint candidate supported by some of them. In all remaining constituencies, every party has put forward its own candidate. The Socialist Party has 574 candidates, the Communist Party has 500, the Greens have 465, Jean-Pierre Chevènement's Republican Pole has 400 and the bourgeois Radical Party has 50.

One problem for the conservatives could be competition from the right. The National Front is running 563 candidates and some observers expect them to make it to the second round in 237 constituencies. Up to now, Chirac has rejected electoral agreements with the extreme right in public, while in actual fact there has been collaboration on many levels.

The parties of the radical left, which together won more than 10 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections, have only a slim chance of reaching the second round. They are running against one another in most constituencies—Lutte Ouvrière (LO) with 560 candidates, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) with 440, and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT) with 200.

The favorable position of Chirac and the right wing is not based on any broad support for their policies, but results from the political cowardice and bankruptcy of the left. This state of affairs had become apparent in the presidential elections and is continuing in the parliamentary elections.

In the first round of the presidential elections, Chirac did not even win a fifth of all votes cast, and all candidates of the bourgeois right taken together lost four million votes compared to the last presidential election, held in 1995. This decline in votes for the traditional right did not, however, benefit the governing left coalition, which had bitterly disappointed the hopes of its voters. The extreme right-wing National Front was the beneficiary. Le Pen outpolled the sitting prime minister and Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, and ran against Chirac in the second round.

In the presidential run-off election, the official left parties threw their support to Chirac, ensuring him an easy victory. Chirac won 80 percent of all votes cast.

The left claimed that a vote for Chirac did not signify support for his policies, but rather for the “values of the republic,” and used this argument to justify its campaign in favor of the corrupt and discredited Gaullist president. Some of the left politicians argued that the more votes Chirac received, the weaker he would be, because a massive victory would demonstrate that he owed his reelection to the support of his opponents.

Chirac, for his part, was not bothered by such posturing and made good use of his unexpectedly decisive electoral triumph.

In his own camp, where his position had previously been precarious, he now commands virtually unchallenged authority. His greatest inner-party rivals—such as Edouard Balladur, his competitor in the presidential election of 1995, and Jean Tiberi, the renegade ex-mayor of Paris—have reconciled themselves with him and are standing as candidates on the list of the UMP, the presidential party.

Only François Bayrou, the president of the UDF, continues to oppose Chirac and has refused to join the UMP. However, only 12 out of 67 MPs of his own party support him. The rest fear they will lose their seats if they stand against UMP candidates on June 9.

In the wake of his May 5 reelection, Chirac has appointed a new government dominated by close confidantes and representatives of big business. At present all strategic positions within the state apparatus are occupied by right-wing politicians: the presidency, the senate, the most important administrative regions and, on the European level, the convention for the future of Europe, which is headed by the former UDF president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

The new head of government, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin (DL), was also appointed in view of the approaching parliamentary elections. He is a loyal follower of Chirac, who readily obeys all orders of the president, while being regarded as a man of compromise and social dialogue. He is expected to attract those voters from the left camp who feel they must avoid the political paralysis that would result from a further five years of "cohabitation," i.e., the combination of a right-wing president and a left government.

This is precisely the central theme of Raffarin's election campaign. Reforms, he preaches, are only possible in an atmosphere of peace and harmony, and not against the backdrop of conflict. Cohabitation, he says, is not compatible with the unity of the French people and prevents the government from acting effectively. In using this argument, he evokes the statements of the Socialist Party, which during the five years of Jospin's government continuously complained that cohabitation was harmful to the country. The head of Jospin's cabinet, Oliver Schrameck, even wrote a book on the subject.

At least as far as the trade unions are concerned, Raffarin's campaign has been successful. In recent days, the leaders of all five national union federations visited the Martignon, the seat of government, and proceeded to praise the qualities of the new prime minister and his willingness to engage in "social dialogue." According to the polls, 60 percent of the French are satisfied with Raffarin after his first four weeks in office.

The key ministries—interior, foreign policy, defense and justice—are, however, manned with ultra-right followers of Chirac. They aim to win over the voters of the National Front by implementing a tough law-and-order policy.

To the great dismay of the left, leading representatives of Chirac's camp have made it clear that they are not willing to stick to the "republican front" against the extreme right, which the left had invoked to justify its support for Chirac in the presidential election.

Serge Lepeltier, the leader of the Gaullist RPR, announced on RTL television that the UMP candidate would not be withdrawn in favor of a left candidate should there be a confrontation between a candidate of the left, the right and the National Front in the second round. Georges Ginesta, the Gaullist president of the administrative region of Var in the South of France, a stronghold of the National Front, has categorically ruled out any withdrawal of a Gaullist candidate. This could pave the way for several candidates of the National Front to enter the National Assembly.

Other representatives of the UMP, however, stressed that the UMP would decide its tactics only after the first round of the election, and insisted that Lepeltier and Ginesta had only spoken in a personal capacity.

In contrast to the bourgeois right, the parliamentary left presents a picture of decline and fragmentation. Unable to draw any lessons from their devastating defeat in the presidential election, the left officials tear each other apart in internal rivalries and competitive strife.

Within the Socialist Party the struggle over the division of the booty has begun, irrespective of the fact that there won't be much to be divided. Following the withdrawal of Jospin, François Hollande has taken over the leadership of the party. He is a dull bureaucrat who has always been

considered a loyal follower of Jospin.

Hollande is generally expected to become head of government should the left, contrary to all expectations, win the election. In all three previous cohabitations, the president had appointed the leader of the majority party in parliament as prime minister. But Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a former finance minister in Jospin's government, never misses an opportunity to challenge Hollande's claim to the post of prime minister in the event of a left victory in this month's voting. "There is no automatism (in appointing the prime minister), this is generally agreed," Strauss-Kahn said in a radio interview.

Laurent Fabius, prime minister under former president Mitterrand, is another competitor laying in wait for Hollande's position. However, he refrains from challenging him in public. Strauss-Kahn and Fabius stand for an extremely right wing, neo-liberal economic policy and would hardly have any difficulties finding a consensus with Chirac.

Another pretender to the role of leader of the Socialist Party is Martine Aubry, the daughter of former EU president Jacques Delors. She withdrew from the government some time ago in order to become mayor of the city of Lille, a move that was generally interpreted as preparation for a career on a higher level. She authored the election program of the Socialist Party, which reiterates some left-sounding phrases from the initial years of the Jospin government. Following the experience with Jospin, who merely used these phrases as a cover for right-wing policies, few people continue to take such rhetoric seriously.

The daily *Libération*, which closely follows the maneuvers within the Socialist Party, has concluded that the Socialists "leave the impression of not wanting to win the elections." According to *Libération*, they are focused more on the presidential election in 2007 than on the parliamentary elections of 2002.

The Greens, which had recorded a significant growth during the first years of the Jospin government, are now "in a state of dissolution", as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, leader of the Greens in the European parliament, put it. They even missed the deadline to apply for campaign advertisements on TV and radio, and will probably have to do without them. The majority voting system leaves them with only a slight chance in those few constituencies where other parties on the left support them.

Meanwhile, Cohn-Bendit is looking out for new allies on the right and voices his sympathy for François Bayrou, the president of the UDF. "If there is a chance during the second round to help Bayrou towards his own parliamentary grouping, we should use it", he told Reuters news agency. "Versailles, where the left has no chance at all, is a case in point where we should support (UDF candidate) General Morillon against the candidate of the presidential majority."

The only point of agreement among the parliamentary left is a common concern for the future of the Communist Party (CPF), whose candidate Robert Hue ended up with miserable 3.4 percent in the presidential elections. It was the most devastating electoral defeat in the history of the party.

Many prominent public figures have donated to the financially weakened organization, including the singer Juliette Gréco and the actor Gérard Depardieu. UDF President Bayrou was among the donors, as Communist Party Secretary Marie-George Buffet was proud to announce. The bourgeois establishment is wary of losing the services of the French CP.

Robert Hue is one of the 34 joint candidates supported by all the parties of the left. Five years ago he received 57 percent of the votes in his constituency of Argenteuil, which is located near Paris. But today, like other MPs of the Communist Party, he has come under pressure from the National Front. In the first round of the presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen won 19 percent and the leading position in the former Communist stronghold, while Hue ended up with merely 10 percent.

The leader of the Socialist Party, Hollande, traveled to Argenteuil to

campaign for his “friend” Hue. They showered each other with compliments and swore to the “united left”, which, they said, was “indispensable for the necessary confrontation of left-wing and right-wing ideas.”

The leader of the Communist Party faction in parliament, Alain Bocquet, is also being challenged by the National Front in his constituency in Northern France, where Le Pen gained 23 percent in the presidential elections, which put him 7 points ahead of Jospin. The vote of the Communist Party, in contrast, decreased from 20 percent to 9 percent since 1995. The candidate of the National Front, Carl Lang, announced that he will “ensure a defeat of the CPF, which is collaborating with the ultra-liberal policy of the plural left and with the ultra-globalistic policies of Brussels.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact