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A Strange Affair

The 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections in France

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The 2002 elections in France were a gripping drama unfolding in 4 acts. Each act has to be understood as part of a whole, as each election was ultimately dependent upon the results of the first round of the presidential election on 21st April. However untypical in the context of Fifth Republican history, the first round of the presidential election strongly influenced the peculiar course of the subsequent contests. The outcome of the first election on the 21st April - at which the far-Right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen won through to the second ballot against Jacques Chirac, narrowly distancing the outgoing premier Lionel Jospin – created an electric shock which reverberated around the streets of Paris and other French cities and spurred a civic mobilisation without parallel since May '68. The end-result of this exceptional

republican mobilisation was to secure the easy (initially rather unexpected) re-election as President of Chirac at the second round two weeks later. The 5th May was unlike a typical second-round election. Rather than a bipolar contest pitting left and right over a choice of future governmental orientations, it was a plebiscite in favour of democracy (hence Chirac) against the far-Right (Le Pen). Chirac was overwhelmingly re-elected as President, supported by at least as many left-wing as right-wing voters. This enforced plebiscite against the extreme Right allowed a resurgent Jacques Chirac to claim a renewed presidential authority. At the parliamentary election of 9th and 16th June, the Fifth Republic reverted to a more traditional mode of operation, as a new 'presidential party', informally launched just weeks before the elections, obtained a large overall majority of seats to 'support the President' in time honoured Fifth Republican tradition.

The electoral drama was played out in four parts of unequal intensity. By far the most intriguing was the first round of the presidential election, to which we devote more attention than the other episodes. Before considering the elections themselves, we take stock of the political and institutional context within which the 2002 contests took place.

The prelude

Presidential elections in France have sometimes been considered as the 'decisive' elections, by which we mean that these elections have shaped the course of subsequent contests, especially parliamentary elections following shortly afterwards, as in 2002. In the normal hierarchy of electoral contests, the results of the presidential

contest matter more than others, or at least they did until the onset of the first cohabitation in 1986.¹ The second ballot electoral system in operation in presidential elections, where only the two best-placed candidates go through to the second round, has generally favoured bipolar left-right contests (in 1965, 1974, 1981, 1988 and 1995), with a candidate of the Socialist left facing either a Gaullist (in 1965, 1988 and 1995) or a non-Gaullist conservative (in 1974 and 1981). Before 2002, in only one election – in 1969 – had the left failed to have a representative on the second round. The logic of presidential elections in the Fifth Republic has been to simplify electoral competition between left and right by a straight second-round contest between the two camps. Such an outcome was announced by everybody in advance in 2002 – by the media, the pollsters, academics and the candidates themselves. The 2002 presidential election was such a strange affair in part because this expected outcome did not materialise. The key to unlocking the 2002 electoral cycle lay in understanding the legacy of ‘plural left’ government and of the 1997-2002 ‘cohabitation’, as much as in appreciating the effects of the election campaign itself (personality, strategy, issues) and the dynamic relationships between successive electoral contests.

The government led by Jospin came to power rather unexpectedly in June 1997, after President Chirac’s dissolution of the National Assembly elected in 1993 went badly wrong and the plural left alliance benefited from the general unpopularity of the Juppé

¹ In 1986, the mainstream right (RPR and UDF) won a short overall majority, thereby inaugurating the first cohabitation. Since 1981, the prevalent tendency has been for decisive elections (presidential and parliamentary) to go against the incumbent government, unless a parliamentary election has followed shortly in the wake of a presidential contest, as in 1981, 1988 and 2002.

government.² The Jospin government was original in many senses. It was the first five party ‘plural left’ government, operating within a novel institutional context: that of the first ‘cohabitation’ involving a Gaullist President and a Socialist-led government. Even its fiercest opponents acknowledged that the Jospin government had engaged in original policy experiments in economic, social and employment policy, of which the enforced reduction of the working week to thirty-five hours was the centrepiece.³ The passions raised by the thirty-five hour week reform played an important role in the 2002 electoral campaigns. The Jospin government also undertook audacious measures to break down social and cultural blockages within French society (such as the civic contract [PACS] and gender equality [parité] reforms) and to modernise French politics. Opinion polls suggested a mainly positive reception for the Jospin government and for the personality of Lionel Jospin in particular. The tendency for all outgoing governments lose elections since 1978, and the fact that no incumbent prime minister has ever gone onto to win a presidential election ought, perhaps, to have dampened Jospin’s optimism. But a surge of support after he declared his candidacy on February 18th led most observers to predict a Jospin second-round victory.

² The five parties of the plural left alliance were: the Socialists (PS), the Communists (PCF), the Greens, the left-Radicals and the Citizens’ Movement. The latter, essentially a vehicle for the ambitions of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, transformed itself into the Republican Pole to accompany Chevènement’s presidential election campaign.

³ See Alistair Cole (ed.) ‘The Jospin Government, 1997-2002’ Modern and Contemporary France, vol. 8 no.3, August 2002.

From 1997-2002, there was also a five-year long ‘cohabitation’, on this occasion signifying the institutional co-existence of a Gaullist President and a Socialist-led government. Though public opinion evidence is somewhat mixed⁴ most polls suggested that, other things being equal, the French would prefer not to have ‘cohabitation’. It lies beyond the limited confines of this article to appraise ‘cohabitation’, an exercise carried out admirably elsewhere⁵. We observe, however, that the two heads of the executive had assumed together the responsibility for the governance of France for the past five years. For Jean-Luc Parodi ‘cohabitation’ was at the heart of the problem of the 2002 elections.⁶ ‘Cohabitation’ had deprived the political system of a real opposition, a phenomenon that had become much more aggravated in 1997-2002 by contrast to the other experiences of ‘cohabitation’ because this institutional state had lasted for much longer. It was not surprising that the electorate was unable to distinguish between Chirac and Jospin.⁷ The two main

⁴ In late March 2002, a Louis-Harris-AOL-Libération poll indicated that 50% considered a new ‘cohabitation’ to be acceptable, against only 11% who were viscerally opposed. By late May 2002, Libération reported that almost half the electorate intending to vote expressed a preference for the pro-Chirac UMP in order to ensure institutional consistency. Libération, 29 March 2002, 31 May 2002.

⁵ See Robert Elgie ‘La cohabitation de longue durée: studying the 1997-2002 experience’, Modern and Contemporary France, vol 8, no 3, August 2002. Also John Gaffney, ‘Protocol, Image, and Discourse in Political Leadership Competition: the Case of French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, 1997-2002’ Modern and Contemporary France, vol: no 3, August 2002.

⁶ Jean-Luc Parodi ‘De l’incertitude au choix’. Communication at the French Political Science Association one day conference on ‘L’élection présidentielle entre deux tours’. Institute of Political Studies, Paris, 26th April 2002.

⁷ Shortly after both candidates had declared their hand, the Libération- Louis Harris- AOL poll indicated that 74% considered the programmes of Chirac and Jospin to be similar and 59% of the electorate were ‘uninterested’ in the campaign.

players of the 1997-2002 cohabitation had seemed mostly to have good relations, at least where a 'good' relationship was in the interests of France or where co-operation was vital (as over European policy or foreign affairs). But seasoned observers discerned bitter opposition and highly personalised conflict throughout the cohabitation experience, a rivalry that became obvious with the onset of the campaign.⁸ Amongst the main players there was a degree of cross-partisan consensus that 'cohabitation' was not an ideal arrangement, an idea supported in January 2002 by Jospin himself.

The demand for institutional cohesion was formulated first of all by Jospin, who grasped upon the idea (initially floated by former President Giscard d'Estaing) that the order of the presidential and parliamentary elections should be reversed.⁹ The Socialist premier pushed through this reform in late 2000, in the expectation that he would be the principal beneficiary of this institutional tinkering. Though the function of the presidency had been called into question throughout 'cohabitation', Jospin's act confirmed a shared belief in the hierarchy of the presidential institution in the Fifth Republic. The paradox was that Jospin might have won had the existing schedule been maintained. In addition to reversing the order of the elections, the Jospin government pushed through the reduction of the presidential term-in-office from seven to five years, with the expectation (but not the guarantee) that presidential and parliamentary majorities would coincide. Five-year terms for both president and parliament would bring an end to logic of a 'decisive' election every two years and, it

⁸ Olivier Schrameck, Matignon Rive Gauche, 1997-2001 (Paris, Seuil, 2001).

was believed, would probably strengthen the presidential basis of the system.

The election campaign

The 2002 series of elections demonstrate without any doubt the importance of election campaigns, especially in the highly personalised contest for the presidency. At the beginning of 2002, though neither president nor premier had declared with certainty their intention to stand, opinion polls declared Chirac and Jospin to be the overwhelming favourites to win through to the second round.¹⁰ By the time of the last polls before the first ballot, both Chirac and Jospin had lost considerable ground, though no pollster accurately predicted the order of candidates on 21st April. In the meantime, the fortunes of several candidates had ebbed and flowed, with Chevènement, Laguiller and Le Pen successively occupying the third position behind the two announced second round candidates.¹¹ A whole host of ‘minor’ candidates entered the fray, assisted by the rules of campaign finance and the eligibility arrangements that we consider below.

⁹ The parliamentary elections were initially due to take place several weeks before the presidential one, which would, it was feared, have confirmed the subordination of the presidency to the National Assembly.

¹⁰ On 11-12 January 2002, for example, IPSOS credited Chirac with 28% of first round voting intentions and Jospin with 24%. Le Pen (8%) was in fourth position, behind Chevènement (10%). Cited in La Croix, 8 February 2002.

¹¹ For much of late 2001 and early 2002, Jean-Pierre Chevènement forced the pace as the ‘third man’, reaching the giddy heights of 14% in one CSA poll of 30-31 January 2002. The far-Left Laguiller took

The first-round campaign mattered in 2002 in spite of the efforts deployed by Chirac and Jospin to minimise its importance. Jacques Gerstlé provides us with a useful comparative overview of presidential election campaigns in the Fifth Republic¹². He distinguishes between open and closed elections, with the critical variable being the degree of belief within the electorate (and amongst the candidates) about the likely contenders in the second round. We can draw an obvious distinction between the campaigns of 1995 and 2002. In 1995 the campaign was focussed on a dual on the right, between Edouard Balladur and Jacques Chirac, a campaign won by the latter as a result of skilful political positioning. The competition on the right between Chirac and Balladur produced a much more open contest than in 2002, when everybody believed from the outset that Chirac and Jospin would fight the second-round run-off. In open elections, there is a tendency for voters not to disperse their first-round votes, as this might prevent their preferred choice for President from contesting the run-off. In closed elections, in contrast, electors allow themselves the luxury of a first round vote for a minor candidate, with dispersion and electoral fragmentation as the natural consequence.

In 2002, there was no suspense. The contenders for the second round were announced in advance, the two players of ‘cohabitation’, Chirac and Jospin, the same two second round candidates as in 1995. That the campaign was seen as a formality explained why the leading contenders - Jospin and Chirac – both fought ‘second round’

over briefly as surprise third candidate, reaching 10 % in the IPSOS poll on 22-23 March 2002, before Le Pen established his ascendancy. Polls consulted in the Interregional Political Observatory, Paris.

¹² Jacques Gerstlé, ‘Les campagnes électorales’. Communication at the French Political Science Association one day conference on ‘L’élection présidentielle entre deux tours’. Institute of Political Studies, Paris, 26th April 2002.

campaigns, designed to extend their appeal as broadly as possible for the decisive contest. The first round was a formality, a strategic waiting game and – crucially – an opportunity to develop the candidate's appeal amongst centre voters for the all-important second round. Both front-runners were so confident of acceding to the second round that they scarcely bothered to campaign at all. The outgoing premier Jospin declared himself to be a candidate only sixty days before the first round, President Chirac seventy-nine days before. The strategy was to declare as late as possible, in part to allow the minor candidates to exhaust themselves, but also to enjoy the benefits of incumbency for as long as possible.

Neither Jospin (especially) nor Chirac were particularly convincing. The campaign of the outgoing President was below par for someone renowned for fighting good election campaigns. The rash promise made in mid-campaign to lower income taxes by 30% over the five years of a presidential term-in-office appeared not only irresponsible, but also unrealistic. Presidential campaign declarations over when the budget would be brought into balance were reneged in European fora (at the Barcelona summit of March 2002 notably), only to be reaffirmed once back on French soil, a tactic that irritated France's neighbours. But at least people had become used to Jacques Chirac's double language.

Jospin's campaign was especially poor. He launched his bid in mid-February with the revelation of his 'not being a Socialist', which disappointed supporters but did not deceive opponents. This ideological abnegation destabilised the governmental left and prevented it from running a campaign on the basis of the previous government's record. Moreover, it opened a boulevard for the extreme left. Jospin's comment on

the age of President Chirac (who was ‘old, tired, worn-out’) was very ill-advised, since it implied a criticism not only of Chirac but also of the dignity of the presidential function. Once the far-left candidates began to take off in the polls, Jospin attempted to reposition himself on the left (where he really belonged), but this manoeuvre undermined his sincerity, a quality he had previously nurtured and cherished. Jospin ignored the political lessons he ought to have drawn from former President Mitterrand, who always united the core Socialist electorate on the first round before embracing the centre on the second. As outgoing premier, Jospin was attacked by everybody, including by the four candidates representing erstwhile alliance parties in the plural left coalition. The damage caused by former minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, in particular, was incalculable.¹³

Campaign Issues

In a very real sense, the 2002 campaign was fought as a single-issue campaign over the issue of insecurity. Events and campaign strategies converged to define the agenda. A concatenation of events - the middle-east crisis, the aftermath of September 11th, and above all a set of particularly shocking murders and violent disorders in France itself - set the agenda for the two months of the campaign proper. In all other recent election campaigns, the theme of unemployment has emerged as the principal preoccupation of voters. Not so in 2002. SOFRES polls demonstrated that from January 2000 insecurity had replaced unemployment as the principal subject of

¹³ Chevènement had been Jospin’s Interior Minister for most of the 1997-2002 period, but resigned from the government in protest at the Matignon Agreements for Corsica in 2001, a manoeuvre that allowed him to stand as a self-styled Republican candidate.

concern of French voters.¹⁴ To some extent, Jospin was a victim of his own success in bringing down unemployment rates. The unemployment problem was perceived as less acute than in the past, surpassed in importance by the ubiquitous theme of insecurity, much less favourable political terrain for a centre-left candidate.

Chirac's political skill was demonstrated through his sensitivity to this changing political environment. There was an opportunity for a campaign based on insecurity, one that Chirac grasped eagerly. As early as January 2001, Chirac called, in a speech in Dreux, for a 'French way of fighting against insecurity'. The municipal elections of March 2001, at which the left lost control of a string of major French cities (but gained Paris and Lyons) had demonstrated the pertinence of the theme and how this challenged the left. Insecurity was a key theme of Chirac's presidential address of July 14th 2001, a successful exercise in agenda setting that unsettled Jospin, who did not know how to position himself on this issue. Jean-Marie Le Pen's campaign was fought on essentially the same issues as ever – security, immigration, identity – but this time events all went in his favour. On the ground of insecurity, there was no real challenger to Le Pen. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy to repeat Le Pen's remark that people would always prefer the original to a copy.

Chirac and Jospin shared an interest in keeping important issues off the agenda. There was no real debate on Europe, for example, despite the fact that a Frenchman (former President Giscard d'Estaing) was chairing the Convention on the Future of Europe. Neither Jospin nor Chirac wanted Europe to become an issue of debate, not least because partisan opinion appeared divided on the issue and neither leader had

¹⁴ Jacques Gerstlé, 'Les campagnes électorales'

built a reputation as a respected European statesman.¹⁵ Likewise, there was no debate on many important issues facing France over the next ten years, whether pensions policy, healthcare, public sector deficits or institutional reforms.

The 2002 campaign was remarkable for the diversity of electoral supply. Sixteen candidates obtained the necessary 500 signatures from elected officials to be able to stand for the election. The candidates offered a very large range of electoral choice: three extreme left¹⁶, five separate candidates from the parties that formed the plural left alliance¹⁷, one centre candidate, three candidates from the mainstream right¹⁸, two extreme-Right candidates¹⁹ and two single issue or unclassifiable candidates²⁰. Such a proliferation of candidacies was testament to the vibrancy of French political movements. It was also due in part to the financial and publicity incentives of being a candidate.²¹ That such a large number of candidates representing such disparate

¹⁵ The French presidency of the European Union, during the second semester of 2000, was generally considered to have been disappointing, as a result of the defensive French position at the Nice Summit, and the difficulty of negotiating with two leaders - Jospin and Chirac –against the backdrop of the presidential election in France.

¹⁶ Arlette Laguillier (LO) Olivier Besancenot (LCR) and André Gluckstein (PT).

¹⁷ One Communist (Robert Hue), one left radical (Christiane Taubira) one Green (Noël Mamère), one Republican (Jean-Pierre Chevènement) and one Socialist (Lionel Jospin)

¹⁸ One centrist (François Bayrou, UDF), one liberal (Alain Madelin, DL) and Jacques Chirac, to which we will add Christine Boutin, who previously sat as a UDF deputy.

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Le Pen (FN) and Bruno Megret (MNR)

²⁰ One proto-Green (Corinne Lepage) and one Hunting, Nature, Fishing and Tradition candidate (Jean Saint Josse)

²¹ Candidates having obtained the necessary 500 signatures were entitled to a standard reimbursement of campaign expenses up to 734,000 euros. Candidates polling over 5% were reimbursed up to a

causes was able to obtain support from a limited pool of elected officials (around 38,000 people) testified first to the activism of the minor candidates, but above all to a set of objective and rather unnatural alliances.²² The 16 qualified candidates each had the right to equal television coverage for the duration of the official campaign, starting three weeks before the first round. The official campaign introduced French voters to a series of engaging characters who had previously been ignored by the media: the antillaise Christiane Taubira, the Trotskyite postman Olivier Besancenot or the bucolic Jean St Josse representing the hunting and fishing lobby. These candidates, and nearly all the others, each left their mark on the end-stages of the campaign.

Act 1: The Republic in Danger

No-one – academics, commentators, pollsters – predicted the dramatic outcome of the first round of the French presidential election, at which the far-Right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen (16.86%) came second, behind Chirac (19.88%) but ahead of Jospin (16.18%). The results of the first round are presented in Table One.

---Table One around here ---

aximum of 7,340,000 euros. The minor candidates got a lot of free publicity during the official campaign as all candidates were given exactly the same airtime.

22 The Socialist Party thus encouraged mayors to support Taubira's candidate, in the belief that it would allow Jospin to cast a wider net. The PS also encouraged certain mayors to support Le Pen, considered to be a major threat for Jacques Chirac.

We can make several principal observations in relation to the first round of the presidential election. These concern the mediocre performance of the centre-right candidates, the rise of the anti-system candidates of the right (and left), the humiliating defeat of the plural left and of its erstwhile leader Jospin and the fragmentation of partisan choice.

The mediocre performance of the centre-right

The right – with 31.82% - obtained a historically very low result.²³ With 19.88% of votes cast (but only 13.6% of registered electors) Chirac performed pitifully, by far the weakest score of any outgoing President of the Fifth Republic. In 1995, after a campaign fought on the theme of *la fracture sociale*, Chirac had attracted disproportionate support from the youngest age groups (18-24 and 25-34 year olds) and secured a fairly even spread of electoral support across social classes. In 2002, the youth vote deserted the incumbent President.²⁴ Only 50% of Chirac voters of 1995 transferred in 2002. Chirac's 2002 electorate was a classic conservative one, within which older age groups, small businesses and the retired were heavily over-represented. Chirac performed best in traditional conservative areas in the western and

²³ This figure of 31.82 is reached at by adding Chirac, Madelin, Bayrou and Boutin. There is no iron cast manner of counting the mainstream right candidates. Some might exclude Boutin, but include Lepage, Juppé's former environment minister, but the latter clearly stood on an ecologist ticket

²⁴ According to the Libération-Louis Harris-AOL exit poll published in Libération on 23rd April 2002, Chirac was supported by 15.7% of 18-24 year olds and only 11.8% of 25-34 year olds. In 1995, the same cohort (then 18-24 year olds) had given Chirac 32% support. All figures given in the text are from this poll, unless otherwise indicated.

central areas of France, but was much weaker in the northern and eastern half of France and along the Mediterranean.²⁵ The 2002 presidential election also represented a severe setback for the non-Gaullist centre-right (the parties of the 1978-1998 UDF), whose classic families were represented by François Bayrou (centrists, 6.84%) and Alain Madelin (liberal, 3.91%). Faithful to tradition, Bayrou's supporters were mobilised by the question of Europe, Madelin's by the issue of taxes. The difference between UDF and RPR had been 3.25% in 1988, and only 2% in 1995, but it rose to 8.5% in 2002. What remained of the centre-right was confirmed in its historic bastions: Western France, the Rhône-Alpes and Alsace, but these were also the areas where it declined most severely.

In any normal circumstances, the performance of the leading mainstream right candidates would have been considered an abject failure. But the 2002 presidential election was not normal and Chirac's mediocre election was totally overshadowed by Le Pen's prowess in reaching the second round, which ensured that Chirac would be re-elected President.

Le Pen, the uninvited guest

Taken together, the two candidates of the far-Right – Le Pen and Megret - polled 19.20%, which, put in context, was more in mainland France than Jospin and Hue combined. Le Pen's accession to the second round was *the* story of the election. By

²⁵ Chirac obtained his best scores – from 19.5-22% - in the following 14 départements: Aveyron, Cantal, Corrèze, Creuse, Deux-Sèvres, Hauts-de-Seine, Lozère, Maine-et-Loire, Manche, Mayenne, Morbihan, Orne, Paris and Vendée.

comparison to his past demagogic campaigns, in 2002 Le Pen adopted the mantle of elder statesman, confidently expecting that events and the security-focused campaigns fought by most of the other candidates would play into his hands. Le Pen's electorate embodied a popular France down on its luck. It was more masculine than feminine and older rather than younger²⁶. More than ever, the Le Pen electorate is over-representative of those suffering from the most acute sentiments of economic and physical insecurity. It is the least well-educated electorate of the three main candidates. Le Pen was the favoured choice of the lower middle classes (31.9%) and of workers (26.1%), far outdistancing both the socialist Jospin and the communist Hue in working class support. In terms of its geographical distribution, there were several layers to the 2002 electorate. The Le Pen heartlands were those areas lying to the north and east of a line from Le Havre to Perpignan.²⁷ The FN continues to recruit principally in urban areas in the eastern half of France, but Le Pen did especially well this time in rural areas juxtaposing urban centres. Urban populations have spilled over from the suburbs to the countryside, and, in the words of one expert, 'urban fears have been transferred to the countryside'.²⁸ Le Pen also addressed a specific

²⁶ Le Pen only attracted 12% of the under 25 cohort. He obtained his best scores amongst the 50-64 cohort (21.8%). Le Pen was supported by 19.2% of men, but only 14.9% of women.

²⁷ Le Pen came first in all départements of Provence-Alpes-Cote d-Azar except one (Hautes-Alpes), in seven out of 8 départements in the Rhone-Alpes region, in all but two in Languedoc-Roussillon, in all départements in Franche-Comté, as well as in Alsace, in all but one in Lorraine, as well as in Ardennes, Aisne, Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Oise, Eure, Lot-et-Garonne et Tarn-et-Garonne. All in all the FN leader polled more than 20% in 47 départements – 50% of the total – and more than 25% in 15 départements.

²⁸ Pascal Perrineau 'L'extrême droite'. Communication at the French Political Science Association one day conference on 'L'élection présidentielle entre deux tours'. Institute of Political Studies, Paris, 26th April 2002.

message to France's rural populations worried by EU enlargement and the prospect of reduced farm subsidies. The effectiveness of this message could be observed in the Beaujolais wine-growing region and several other areas.

Fuller analysis of Le Pen's 21st April performance lies beyond this article. We should note that most observers diagnosed a strong coherence at the heart of the FN electorate.²⁹ This was not just a temporary protest vote, but a cry for help from people faced with an uncertain future. The themes that mobilise FN voters reflect a community in crisis. Le Pen was supported by a popular electorate that had suffered under the left and Le Pen progressed most strongly where there was a decline of the plural left vote, especially in areas with a strong rural left tradition. These findings suggest that part of the reason for Le Pen's exceptional score lay in the dissatisfaction by workers and low wage earners with the left in general and Jospin government in particular.

The humiliating defeat of the plural left

The 2002 presidential election represented a severe defeat for the main candidates of the plural left, the Socialist Jospin and the Communist Hue. That Jospin and Hue were outpolled in mainland France by Le Pen and Megret was not only a personal humiliation for the two emblematic figures of the plural left coalition, but cast a dark cloud over the electorate's perception of the previous five years. Jospin had a poor

²⁹ Ibid. See also Michael Samson, 'Cinq millions et demi d'électeurs convaincus', Le Monde, 9th May 2002.

election and drew the logical consequence of this by announcing his retirement from public life on the evening of 21st April. For the first time since 1969, there was no representative of the French left on the second round. A rapid glance at the post-election AOL-Louis Harris poll demonstrates the gulf separating the Socialist candidate from the popular electorate he had claimed to represent as premier. Jospin obtained his best votes amongst women rather than men, amongst some younger voters (the 25-34 category – those first time voters in 1995 who had turned strongly against Chirac, but not 18-24 years olds) and amongst the highest socio-economic categories, especially in the public sector and the best educated.³⁰ But the Socialist candidate was deserted by industrial workers, with only 12% (against 21% in 1995), trailing far behind Le Pen (26.1%) and even Chirac (13.6%). The aversion of the industrial working classes for the Socialist candidate pointed to the dangers of favouring qualitative reforms (such as work sharing and workplace equality) over bread and butter redistributive issues and raising living standards. Jospin performed rather better in south-west and western France than elsewhere, but only one of the 22 mainland regions, and seven metropolitan départements placed Jospin in head.³¹ The performance of Robert Hue, with 3.37% and under one million votes, gave that the terminal debate over the terminal decline of the Communist Party new urgency. The once great party of the French working class now represented only 5.3% of workers, barely half of that captured by the Trotskyite candidate Arlette Laguiller (9.9%). The other candidates of the ‘plural left’ each had cause for satisfaction. By polling over

³⁰ Jospin obtained the support of 19.1% of 25-34 year olds, but only 12.6% of the youngest cohort (18-24). Jospin obtained more support than any other candidate in two categories: Managers and Higher Intellectual professions (23.8%) and intermediary professionals (21.1%)

³¹ Jospin topped the poll in Midi-Pyrénées, and in the following départements in metropolitan France: Ariège, Gers, Haute-Garonne, Hautes-Pyrénées, Nièvre, Seine Saint Denis and Tarn

the five per cent barrier, both Chevènement, the self-styled Republican, and Mamère, the Green candidate, were eligible for the reimbursement of their campaign expenses. The left-Radical, Taubira, fought a strong end-campaign and emerged with 2.32%. Each of these candidates polled more votes than the difference between Le Pen and Jospin on the first round, a factor embittering relations between the former parties of the plural left in the run-up to the parliamentary election. The relatively good performance of these three minor candidates meant that the difference between the left's total in 2002 (32%) and on the first round of the 1995 presidential election (36%) was only four percentage points, the main difference between the two elections being the weakening of the position occupied by Jospin within the left and his failure to reach the second ballot.

In addition to its internal divisions, the plural left was further undermined by the strong performance of two of the three far-left candidates, Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot. An extreme left has always existed alongside the Communist Party in France. From being a minor irritant, however, the Trotskyite left (especially Lutte Ouvrière) has taken over from the PCF as the tribune of the working class and the underprivileged, a role performed by the PCF in its heyday. To an indigenous extreme left culture has been added the influence of powerful cross-national anti-globalisation movements, represented in France by organisations such as ATTAC or the Peasant Confederation of José Bové. The two Trotskyite candidates polled 10% between them, and together outperformed both Jospin and Hue amongst industrial workers.³² Though Laguiller's 5.72% was far below her best opinion poll

³²Laguiller and Besancenot obtained 13.5% of the industrial working class vote, compared to 12% for Jospin and 5.3% for Hue.

performances, she improved marginally upon her score of 1995 and outpolled the official Communist candidate for the first time. Laguiller had to share the role of left-wing tribune with the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) candidate Besancenot, who also distanced the official Communist Hue. Laguiller performed best in those solid industrial working class areas that were previously the reserve of the Communist Party, in northern and eastern France notably. In contrast, Besancenot, the 28 year old postman, scored spectacularly well amongst 18 to 24 year olds (13.9%), where he comfortably distanced both Jospin (12.6%) and Le Pen (12%). While Laguiller progressed to the detriment of the official Communists, Besancenot drew support mainly from those initially tempted by Jospin.

Interpreting the 21st April

There are various ways of reading the results of 21st April, each of which casts a different light on reality. The institutional interpretation emphasises the changing role of presidential elections. Rather than supporting from the first round the candidate they ideally want to see elected president (as in the traditional slogan 'choose on the first-round, eliminate on the second'), electors have begun treating the first round of the presidential election as a 'second-order' election, expressing a preference in the same way they would in a regional or European election. That the 2002 campaign was closed rather than open encouraged such a fragmentation of support. The belief that the first round did not count encouraged electors to support minor or extreme candidates, either through obstinacy or as a way of influencing the agenda of the candidate eventually elected President. There was certainly a lot of choice. With sixteen candidates in competition, the first round played the role of a non-decisive

proportional election, with the bulk of electors firmly believing in a Chirac-Jospin run-off. That this outcome did not materialise deprived the second round of its usual left-right configuration.

A more sociological or political explanation focuses upon dissatisfaction with existing political supply. France's historic political families were each challenged on 21st April: Communists, Socialists, Gaullists, Liberals, Christian Democrats, even Greens. None of these candidates performed as well as they might have expected and many electors were dissatisfied with all of them. The strong performance of the far left and far right candidates, the high abstention rate (at 28.30% a record in any presidential election) and the general dispersion of votes to candidates not generally considered to be genuine presidential contenders (such as St Josse, Chevènement and others) were all part of this trend. Chirac and Jospin, the announced second round contenders, obtained only just over one-third of votes and one-quarter of registered electors between them. The French electorate's vote on 21st April suggests an unresolved tension between French identity, the implicit promises of French citizenship (including the economic promises) and the uncertainty provoked by Europeanisation, globalisation and an uncertain future.

Act 2: When Jacques Chirac finally became a Gaullist

The shockwaves created by Le Pen's accession to the second round reverberated well beyond French shores. Teams of foreign journalists streamed into Paris, anxious to

report a ‘story that won’t go away’. Some European governments – that of Tony Blair in particular - publicly expressed reserves about Le Pen’s second round presence and urged French electors to make the right choice. Within France, a move of mass civic participation arose within days, above all mobilising those too young to vote and those guilty about having voted for leftwing candidates other than Jospin. All parties announced a rush of new members. The main public opposition to Le Pen came from an anxious leftwing electorate and chastened leftwing leaders (but not Jospin or Laguiller) rather than the tenors of the mainstream right.³³ The highlight of the popular protest occurred on May 1st, when over 1,500,000 people demonstrated against Le Pen (of whom some 500,000 in Paris, ten times more than had turned out to support the far-Right leader earlier the same day).

When the results were declared on the evening on 5th May, the extent of the defensive mobilisation against Le Pen became clear. With over 82% of the vote (and over 60% of total electors), Chirac was re-elected with the largest proportion of the registered electorate in any democratic election anywhere in recent memory. Chirac increased his first round total by over 62% of voters, around half of the entire French electorate!

³⁴The outgoing President benefited from a genuine civic mobilisation, with the abstention rate (18%) steeply declining from the first round. Chirac gained a majority in every département and amongst all social classes. Chirac’s electorate was more feminine, better educated, and more middle aged than that of his rival, who obtained

³³ Jospin eventually called on electors to bar the way to the extreme right, but could not bring himself to mention Chirac by name. Laguiller argued for a second-round abstention and lost much support in the process.

³⁴ All figures for the second round of the presidential election are from the Libération -Louis Harris-AOL exit poll. Libération, 7th May 2002.

above average scores amongst men, those without any qualifications and those either at the beginning or the end of their working lives. Industrial workers (33%) gave Le Pen more support than any other any socio-professional group, highlighting the popular bases of the Le Pen electorate and the degree of working class alienation from the Republic. Chirac benefited from massive vote transfers from all candidates, except, logically, from Le Pen. Jospin's first-round vote went overwhelmingly to Jacques Chirac (83%), with only a small minority tempted by abstention (16%) and virtually nobody for Le Pen (1%).

According to the Libération/AOL/Louis Harris poll, 30% of first round Le Pen voters did not back the extreme-right leader on the second, emphasising the protest character of a proportion of the 21st April vote for the far-Right leader.³⁵ On the other hand, Le Pen did manage to increase his total of votes by 700,000 between the two ballots, with the president of the FN polling marginally more (30,000 votes) than the combined Le Pen-Megret total on the 21st April. Le Pen picked some support from first round Chevènement, Saint Josse and Madelin voters and a few first round abstentionists.

Though Chirac was re-elected with an east European majority, he owed his re-election mainly to a democratic revival. Many left-wing voters justified their support for Chirac by preferring *l'Escroc* (the criminal) to *le Facho* (the fascist, Le Pen). In a strange way, however, Chirac had at last become a Gaullist. The circumstances of his re-election in 2002 were not that different from those of the early years of the Fifth

³⁵ 70% voted for Le Pen on the second round, but 20 abstained or spoiled their ballot and 10% supported Chirac

Republic, 1958-1962, when de Gaulle had to face the rebellious generals and embodied democratic legitimacy. There had also, in 1961, been strikes to support de Gaulle from unions and others not suspected of being of the right. The second round was a plebiscite for democracy, embodied in the unlikely figure of Jacques Chirac, the outgoing President embroiled in a series of corruption scandals, but consistently firm towards not tolerating the extreme-Right. The final paradox of the 2002 presidential election was that Le Pen facilitated the worst result he could have anticipated: the overwhelming re-election of Jacques Chirac, his avowed enemy, to the presidency.

Acts 3 and 4. The return of the presidential party

The parliamentary elections took place just five weeks after the end of the presidential contest, the first round on June 9th, the second on June 16th. Consistent with the unwritten rule that the premier invited by the president to form a government should represent the political mood expressed at the presidential election, President Chirac nominated Jean-Pierre Raffarin (DL) to head of a temporary government (Raffarin 1) that would steer France until the parliamentary contest.³⁶ The nomination of Raffarin was worthy on at least three counts. It was the first time since Raymond Barre (1976-81) that a prime minister had been selected from outside the ranks of the PS or RPR, the President acknowledging the very broad basis of his second round majority. Second, this was the first time that the head of one of France's regional councils

³⁶ Many made Nicholas Sarkozy, the tough RPR mayor of Neuilly, the front runner. But Sarkozy would not have been a consensual choice likely to rally as broad a coalition as possible for the parliamentary election.

(Poitou-Charentes) had been elected as premier, presaging closer attention to the concerns of provincial France ('La France d'en bas'). Third, and probably more significantly, President Chirac exercised a very close control over the creation of the first Raffarin government, with most appointments either prompted or directly imposed by Chirac. In spite of the premiership escaping the RPR, most of the key positions in the government were held by Chirac loyalists. Once safely re-installed in the Elysée Palace, Chirac set about capturing all the levers of political power and resuming the presidency interrupted in 1997 by his calamitous dissolution of the National Assembly. Rather like previous Presidents such as de Gaulle, Giscard d'Estaing or Mitterrand, Chirac called upon the French people to 'give me a clear and coherent majority' in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.³⁷

The prominence of institutional issues was clear in the 2002 campaign; the right made 'cohabitation' into its main enemy during the election. Polls suggested that public opposition to the prospect of a new cohabitation had grown since Chirac's re-election.

³⁸ The PS was trapped by its institutional practice of the past five years, and by its strongly anti-cohabitacionist message during the presidential campaign. While the presidential election had focussed on issues (especially insecurity) the parliamentary election campaign centred almost entirely on institutions and the president's demand for institutional coherence. The left, demobilised and leaderless, made a half-hearted attempt to dissuade electors from conferring all the powers on the President, but was undermined by the harsh criticism of cohabitation made by close Jospin aides just before the presidential election. Little attempt was made to defend the policy record of

³⁷ Le Monde, 1st June 2002.

³⁸ See footnote 4.

the 1997-2002 government, with the Socialist Party disorientated by the collapse of its working class vote that many attributed to the poor reception of its flagship policy, the 35 hours week.

A total of 8455 candidates presented themselves in 577 constituencies, an average of 14.65 per seat, the highest ever. On the left, a minimal electoral agreement had been negotiated before the presidential election. In a small number of constituencies, where there was a real danger that the left would not obtain enough support to go through to the second round, the main left parties (PS, PCF, Greens and Radicals) joined forces and presented a single candidate from the first round. Chevènement's Republican Pole was pointedly left out of these agreements and presented candidates in virtually every constituency. In a much larger number of constituencies, no such agreement was concluded, though variable local agreements (PS/Greens, PS/PCF, PS/Radicals) were operational in many cases. On the right, the Union pour la Majorité présidentielle (UMP - see below) presented official candidates in all but 6 constituencies, where it supported Bayrou's rump UDF. As usual, there was a rash of unofficial 'presidential majority' candidates, some of which performed better than the official UMP ticket. The far-right parties (FN and MNR) presented separate candidates in the overwhelming majority of constituencies, as did the far-left parties (LO and LCR) and the CNPT ('Hunters and Fishers'). The inflated number of candidates was mainly attributable to the rules on campaign finance, which allow parties to obtain state funding on the condition that they field candidates in at least 50 constituencies, spread across 30 separate départements. The promise of financial support encouraged a bewildering mass of candidates and contributed, along with

their belief that the result was determined in advance, to the public's disinterest in the elections.

Results and Analysis

There were many similarities between the 2002 parliamentary elections and those of 1962, 1981 and 1988. For Jean-Luc Parodi, these were 'elections of confirmation' following earlier decisive contests, in the form of presidential victories for Chirac in 2002 and Mitterrand in 1981 and 1988, and a successful constitutional referendum for de Gaulle in 1962.³⁹ There is an institutional logic to this, Parodi argues, as the electorate signifies a demand for consistency and cohesion. The legislative election is dependent upon the decisive presidential election (or referendum). There is a strong abstentionist tendency, as many electors consider the decisive battle already to have been fought: this explains in part the record abstention rate (35.62%), the highest in any parliamentary election since the beginning of the Fifth Republic.

French parliamentary elections are fought under the second-ballot system. France is divided into 577 single-member constituencies. To be elected at the first round, a candidate needs to poll over 50% of voters and 25% of registered electors in the constituency: in 2002, 58 candidates were elected on the first-ballot, 46 belonging to

³⁹ Jean Luc Parodi ' De la présidentielle aux législatives'. Communication to the French Political Science Association one-day conference on the parliamentary election. Paris, Institute of Political Studies, 19 June 2002.

the UMP. In the other 519 cases, where a second ballot was necessary, candidates needed to have obtained over 12.5% of registered voters (about 18% of actual voters) to contest the second round. In most constituencies, second round contests pitted a member of the UMP against a Socialist candidate. The FN, losing over one-third of Le Pen's 21st April electorate, only managed to present candidates in 37 second-round contests, down from 133 in 1997. As outlined in Table Two, the electoral system in 2002 operated in its customary manner, much more so than in 1997. The consistent trait of elections fought under the second-ballot system is to magnify the proportion of seats for the leading party, to represent fairly accurately the second party, but to discriminate harshly against minor parties, especially those who geographical support is not concentrated, or those such as the FN which cannot form alliances. The UMP, with 34.05% of the vote, obtained over two-thirds of the seats. The PS obtained a just distribution of seats to votes. The PCF resisted well, but only because it remains solidly implanted in a very small number of bastions. The FN easily outpolled the PCF, but did not return a single deputy! It was unable to form second-round alliances with other parties and could only provoke 9 triangular contests, against 76 in 1997.⁴⁰

----Table Two around here ----

⁴⁰ The main difference between the 1997 and 2002 elections related to the number of three-way contests. There were 9 – down from 76 in 1997. There were 28 duels between FN and UMP (from 56 in 1997) and only 8 duels between the left and the FN (from 25 in 1997). The right won back 43 of the seats it had lost as a result of three-way contests in 1997.

The parliamentary elections gave rise to three main conclusions: the return of the presidential party, the retreat of the left and its consolidation around the Socialist Party and the formal return of bipolar party politics.

The return of the presidential party

Consistent with his desire to govern effectively, Chirac imposed the creation of the UMP as a presidential platform to which all existing parties (RPR, UDF, DL and so on) would have to subscribe. UMP candidates had to accept to sit in the same parliamentary group in the National Assembly, to support the President and to participate in the creation of a vast new party of the French right in autumn 2002. A committee containing representatives of the three main pro-Chirac parties (RPR, DL, part of the UDF) but heavily weighted in favour of the RPR distributed UMP candidacies in the parliamentary contest.⁴¹ François Bayrou led the resistance of a centrist rump, retaining the title UDF and pledging critical support for Jacques Chirac.

The anticipated victory of the right fully materialised on June 9th and June 16th. The parties of the UMP gained seven percentage points by comparison with 1997 and greatly improved upon their first round presidential performance. The UMP obtained 65% of overall seats – and 92% of seats within the right. There was a massive shift within the ‘right-wing’ camp between the presidential and parliamentary elections. On 21st April, the candidates of the mainstream right (Chirac, Bayrou, Madelin, Boutin) had obtained 61% of the rightwing total; on 9th June, this figure had risen to 77.7%.

⁴¹ Most incumbent RPR deputies agreed to this, as well as more than half of those elected in 1997 on a UDF ticket as well as nearly all DL sitting deputies.

The presidential party strategy worked exactly to plan. This strategy involved not just providing a majority for the President, but also engineering a re-alignment within the right in favour of the RPR, to sweeten the pill of the dissolution of the Gaullist movement into a much broader Conservative Party.

The French Right has been hampered by its divisions ever since the decline of historic Gaullism and the creation of the RPR (1976) and UDF (1978) in the 1970s. In addition, the rise of the FN from 1983 onwards has posed acute dilemmas of alliance strategy and political positioning for the parties of the mainstream right. The FN was a problem because the right was divided, hence too weak to ignore the far-right movement. The 2002 elections represented the first time since 1973 that there had not been at least two major parties on the French right. Right-wing unity paid off handsomely. The UMP won an overall majority (399 seats out of 577), only the third time in the history of the Fifth Republic that a single political formation has held an overall majority⁴². In 2002, the UMP formula masked a new domination of the RPR, whose candidates captured almost half of first round UMP votes (49%, compared with 20% for the UMP-UDF, 15% for UMP-DL and 16% for UMP-other right candidates).⁴³ Most of the 30 non-UMP UDF deputies were, in fact, supported by the UMP from the first-ballot, lessening Bayrou's claim for the independence of the centre. Of the 30 UDF deputies, only 6 of these were as a result of primaries and 24 supported by the UMP. In 130 UDF/UMP primaries, the UDF obtained around 25%

⁴² The Gaullists from 1968 to 1973 and the Socialists from 1981 to 1986 are the other examples.

⁴³ There were several reasons for this RPR domination, not least the divisions within the former UDF itself, as a majority of sitting deputies rallied to Chirac and the UMP against the attempt by Bayrou to retain the UDF as an independent centre party. We should also mention the domination by the RPR over the negotiation of the UMP candidatures after Chirac's election.

of the right total, to the UMP's 75%.⁴⁴ With the election of an overall majority for a single formation of the mainstream right, the French party system again resembles that of the 1960s, whereby a dominant presidential rally is flanked by a small centre party, a 'reservist' force of the right whose existence is barely tolerated

The retreat of the Left

In the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Socialist Party benefited from the bipolarising aftermath of the presidential campaign. Rather than dissipate the electoral capital of the left, as on April 21st, leftwing voters preferred by and large to vote usefully from the first round for the Socialist Party candidate. The resulting PS total – 26.7% with the left-radicals - allowed the party to salvage some honour from an anticipated defeat. The Socialists (with allies) virtually repeated their first round score of 1997, but the left as a whole was brought to its knees by the enduring collapse of the PCF vote (4.8%, down from 9.88% in 1997), by the fragility of the Greens (4.5%) and by the opposition of the Republican Pole candidates. The Socialist party campaign was led by a courageous François Hollande, the leader who assumed the mantle after Jospin's exit from public life. Though Hollande saved his seat in Tulle (Corrèze), many leading figures of the Jospin years were defeated, most emblematically Martine Aubry in the previously safe seat of Lille- Seclin, the PCF leader Hue in Argenteuil, the Green leader Voynet in Dole and the Republican Pole leader Chevènement in

⁴⁴ Jérôme Jaffré 'Le vote des droites'. Communication to the French Political Science Association one-day conference on the parliamentary election. Paris, Institute of Political Studies, 19 June 2002.

Belfort. The defeat of Martine Aubry, the driving force behind the 35 hours, symbolised the rupture between the Socialists and the industrial working class even in their historic bastions in northern France. By contrast, the performance of the Socialists in Paris went against the national trend: the Socialists and the Greens, in control of Paris townhall since 2001, won a majority of seats in the capital. More than ever, the Socialists remain the pivotal party of the French left, around which all else turns.

Interpreting June 9th and June 16th : a case of bipolar politics as normal?

The electoral series of 2002 defied many basic bipolar rules of the Fifth Republic. April 21st did not produce a run-off between left and right. May 5th was a quasi-referendum . On June 9 and June 16th, the French party system returned to something resembling its normal bipolar state. Two parties – the UMP on the right and the PS on the left – occupied almost 90% of parliamentary seats, a far greater measure of bipartisanship in than in recent elections. The hegemony of the UMP on the right was matched by a domination of the Socialists on the left, in votes as well as in seats. The far-left parties (2.83%) were squeezed by the movement to use usefully for the Socialists, as was the Republican Pole, with just over 1%, and, to a lesser extent, the Greens (4.5%) and the Communists (4.8%). The far-right lost one-third of its electorate by comparison to April 21st (11.33% for the FN, 1.10/% for the MNR) and was unable to repeat its spoiling tactics of 1997, when it had helped the left win the election.

The 2002 electoral series ended with a return to (bipolar) politics as normal, powerfully assisted by the second-ballot electoral system which, deprived of FN-provoked primaries, operated in a classic majoritarian manner. The PS was more than ever the dominant party of the left, the FN had not shown itself to be a credible second round presence, either in the presidential or the parliamentary election, minor parties of all hues who had performed well on 21st April were not confirmed in subsequent contests, the RPR re-established its traditional domination within the French right and the President recaptured control of his presidential majority in the Assembly.

Conclusion

At one level, the 2002 electoral series can be interpreted as a return to presidentialism as the key organising principle of the Fifth Republic, albeit by a circuitous route. The underlying legitimacy of the system is shaped by the choices made by all key actors in favour of the presidential election as the decisive election in the Fifth Republic. A President genuinely representing the French nation was invested by the electorate with a 'clear and consistent' majority, as he had requested. Better still, the electoral series was crowned by an overall majority in seats for the new style presidential party, the best performance of a right-wing presidential rally since the heyday of Gaullism. Moreover, excepting unforeseen circumstances, the five year parliament elected in 2002 will coincide with a five year term in office for President Chirac. The converging of the presidential and parliamentary majorities and the subordinate

relationship of the latter to the former would appear to signal a return to a suitably modernised but pre-eminently presidential practice. The exceptional nature of Chirac's second round victory can not conceal his poor performance of 21st April, however, and this provides a narrow basis for holding all the key offices of the Republic. While clarifying institutional practice, the electoral series of 2002 leaves many questions unanswered, the most important of which is whether France's new rulers will be able to build bridges with that sizeable proportion of the French electorate that appears alienated from political processes and takes refuge in support for extremes. The long-term future of the Republic might depend upon it.