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THE 2002 FRENCH ELECTIONS: A DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

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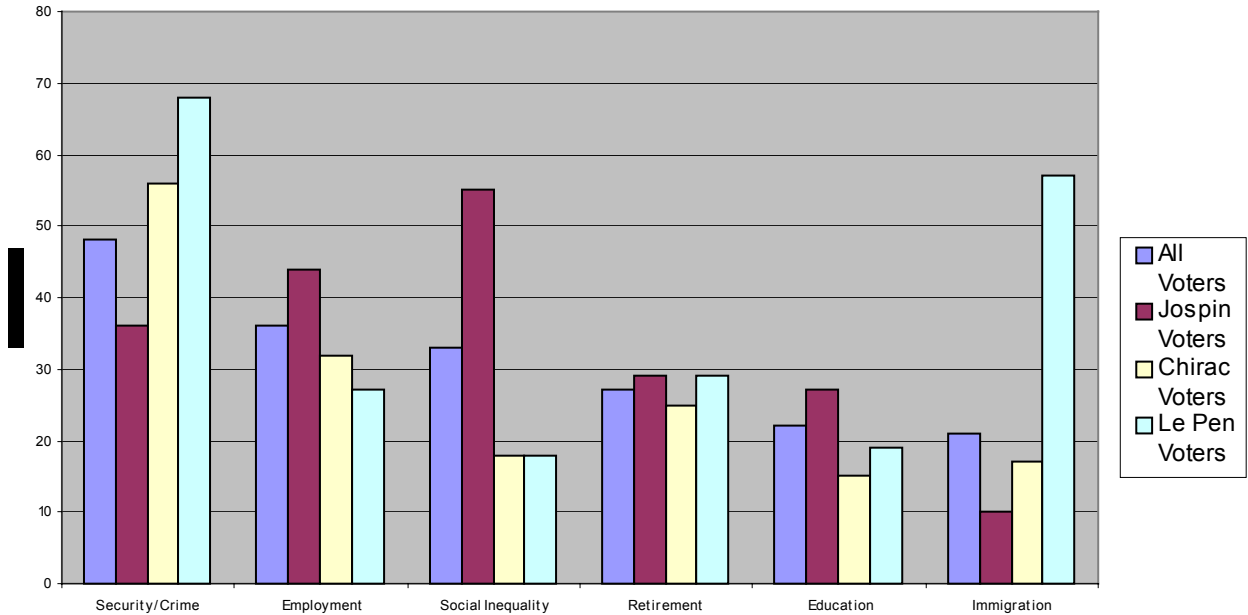
France has lived through an extraordinary electoral drama in recent months, best characterized as four acts of elections (two rounds of the presidential election, two rounds of the legislative elections), followed by the present fifth act in which the government's program is finally understood by the people that voted for it. In each act, the French electorate misjudged the effect of their votes, but in the wake of each of their mistakes, they adapted their behavior to the actual result, and in so doing imbued the next act with a logic of its own.

Act One: (April 21, Presidential election, first round). A French presidential election is a simple majority, first-past-the-post contest. Nonetheless, the voters in the first round of the Presidential election behaved as if their votes would be translated into some sort of proportional representation. Voters seemed bored by the supposedly inevitable final match-up between President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and were not really able to identify any difference between them on the issues. Thus they decided to send a "message," choosing either to abstain and wait for the decisive round, or to vote for one of the other fourteen candidates, often as a form of protest.

Following a European trend--but for the first time in a French national election--security and crime was the most important issue for French voters.¹ (See Figure 1) Accordingly, both Chirac and Jospin placed security on the top of their campaign agenda, and proposed almost exactly the same solutions for France's crime problem (e.g. creation of a new ministry for law and order, increases in police, and reforms of the judicial system). Perhaps as a result, an opinion poll published on April 3 showed for the first time that Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the far-right *Front National*, was seen as the best candidate to address the crime problem. As he had always claimed, people prefer the original to the imitation. Moreover, the right has always been considered more credible on this issue than the supposedly naive left.

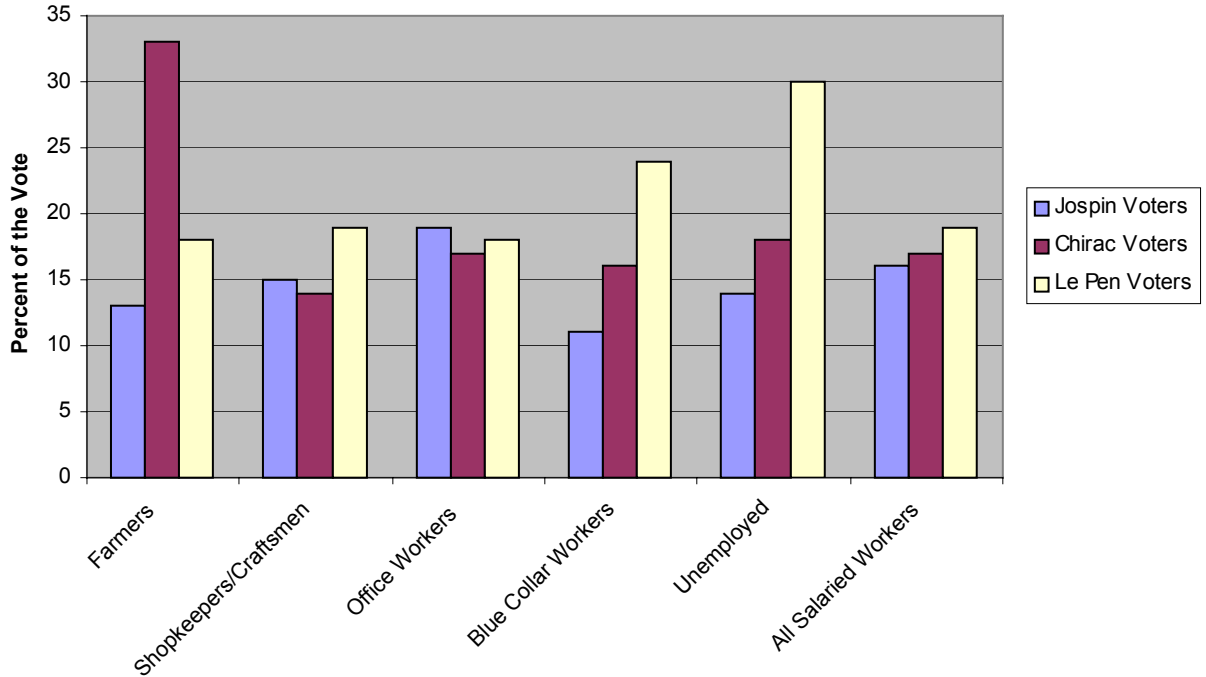
¹ The majority of leftist voters, however, cited unemployment and social inequities before crime in the exit polls on April 21.

Figure 1: What issues were most important to you in the Presidential Campaign?



Among 16 candidates, Chirac polled 19%, Le Pen 16.9% and Jospin just 16.2% and the left was excluded from the second round for the first time since 1969. (See Table 1) In what was a terrible shock to the French political system, Le Pen became Chirac's opponent in the second round. Le Pen not only polled first among shopkeepers, craftsmen, blue-collar workers and the unemployed (as he had in previous elections), but also among the middle class. For the first time, Le Pen garnered the most votes among white-collar workers—a slap in the face for any European socialist party. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: Voting Distribution among Selected Professions



The electoral successes of the National Front are often explained by the existence a "social protest" vote that is expressing its frustration with a political system that does not take into account the fears, distresses and hopes of a certain segment of the electorate. This dynamic is still part of the explanation, but in this election, there was also a "political protest" vote against the idea of cohabitation, as well as against a moderate right that had not heard their constituency's complaints about security and immigration (and the link that they established between the two issues). The "politically correct" interpretation of the election results thus holds that the nearly 20% of the French electorate that voted for Le Pen are not all, or even in the main, racist. However, in a country where about 40 to 45% of people interviewed regularly say that they dislike Arabs, that Arabs are too numerous in the country, and that they harbor reflexive feelings of antipathy towards young Frenchmen of Arab origin, anti-immigrant sentiment must at least have played a role in support that *Front National* received. When Le Pen speaks about these "gangs of young delinquents in the suburbs," his supporters hear "Arab young people." When Le Pen jokes about the "patronymics" (roughly, family names) of the people who commit crimes in French cities, everyone understands what he means.

Table 1: Presidential Election Results

CANDIDATE	1 st ROUND	2 nd ROUND
Jacques Chirac (Rassemblement pour la République)	19.9	82.2
Jean-Marie le Pen (Front National)	16.9	17.8
Lionel Jospin (Parti Socialiste)	16.2	-
François Bayrou (Union pour la Démocratie Française)	6.8	-
Arlette Laguiller (Lutte Ouvrière)	5.7	-
Jean-Pierre Chevènement (Pôle Républicain)	5.3	-
Noël Mamère (Les Verts)	5.2	-
Olivier Besancenot (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire)	4.2	-
Jean Saint-Josse (Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions)	4.2	-
Alain Madelin (Démocratie Libérale)	3.9	-
Robert Hue (Parti Communiste Français)	3.4	-
Bruno Mégrét (Mouvement National Républicain)	2.3	-
Christiane Taubira (Parti Radical de Gauche)	2.3	-
Corinne Lepage (Citoyenneté Action Participation pour le 21ème siècle)	1.9	-
Christine Boutin (Forum des républicains sociaux)	1.2	-
Daniel Gluckstein (Parti des Travailleurs)	0.5	

The result of the first round of the Presidential election was terrible not only for Jospin, it was also a disaster for the entire center-left (who received 27.1% of the vote), in large part because of the rise of the extreme left (10.4% combined for the three Trotskyist candidates), and the presence of the "Republican" candidate, the former socialist Minister of the Interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement. (5.3%) The first round presidential vote for the mainstream left has thus decreased steadily from 43.4% in 1981 to 40.9% in 1988, 31.9% in 1995 and 27.1% in 2002.

And – due to the breakthrough of the extreme right (19.2% combined for Le Pen and Bruno Mégrét of the *Mouvement National Républicain*), it was also a disaster for the right, whose first round presidential tally has also decreased, though somewhat less steadily, from 49.3% in 1981, to 36.4% in 1988, 44.1% in 1995, and 31.8% in 2002.

Act Two: (May 5, Presidential election, second round). Le Pen's showing in the first act meant that the second act of the election became a referendum on democracy and the Republic. An "anti-fascist psychodrama" seized French society, and especially the major media outlets, which conveniently forgot their own role in promoting the crime issue and thus Le Pen during the months preceding the election. Information on election issues gave way in the press to "democratic" propaganda. A large and truly spontaneous mobilization of the youth of France was organised in the streets, particularly for the May 1 holiday. As a result, the rate of abstention in the second round fell from 28% to 20% and Chirac was elected by 82.2% of the votes cast, with a slightly higher proportion of leftist than rightist votes.

Some commentators and politicians believed that this burst of mass political activity would reinvigorate voter participation in France. Obviously, they had not read the very numerous opinion polls and other data about the state of mind of young voters. In all of these surveys, most young people said that they were increasingly indifferent to political games, to the "unkept promises" of electoral campaigns, to the gap between politics and "real" life. Many of them tended to reverse the traditional slogan. Not only is voting no longer considered a civic duty, but many young French voters believe that those who really care about the body politic should feel obliged *not* to participate in the confidence game that French politics has become. The one exception to this rule, most of French votes told the pollsters, came if there was a risk of Le Pen winning the election. That risk manifested itself and so the youth participated in the second round. Afterwards, politicians went back to their usual games, and French voters similarly returned to their indifference. The result was a 39% abstention rate in the second round of the parliamentary elections on June 16, rising to more than 55% among people less than 25 years old.

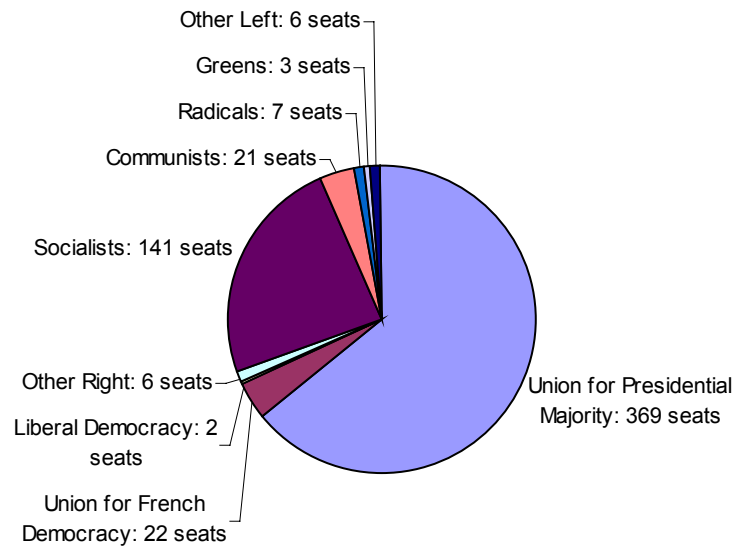
Acts Three and Four (June 9 and June 16, Legislative Elections First and Second Rounds). Having learned their lesson from the unexpected results of the presidential election, the majority of French voters decided to use the third and fourth acts to give a logic to the overall sequence of events and thus to give a working majority in the National Assembly to President Chirac.

Some analysts seem to have been surprised by this apparent reversal in French opinion about "cohabitation", the system in which one party holds the Presidency while the other has a majority in the National Assembly and therefore appoints the prime minister and his cabinet. In fact, according to the polls, the French public has never like the cohabitation system as such. Rather, they were satisfied with the system as long as the institutions of government worked smoothly and no crisis resulted. They felt confident that both Chirac and Jospin would play the game, would not take advantage of cohabitation to fight political battles against one another, and would represent France abroad with one voice.

Nonetheless, French voters prefer clarity and stability. They want – as most Europeans do – to know who is in power and who is in the opposition. They prefer to have a clear and stable majority, even if only to know who get rid of it in the next election cycle, as they have done in every legislative election since 1978. Under these conditions, the leftist campaign slogan, "do not give all the power to the same party" did not have any effect. Neither the mainstream right nor the left appears to be a danger to democracy. And the voters know they will be able to change parties in the next election.

Moreover, 25% to 30% of Socialist voters told the pollsters that it was the right's turn in government and either abstained or even voted for the right. On the right, a minority of Le Pen voters, disappointed, also abstained, or voted for the moderate rightist candidates, probably because of the visibility of the new Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, on the issues of crime and insecurity.

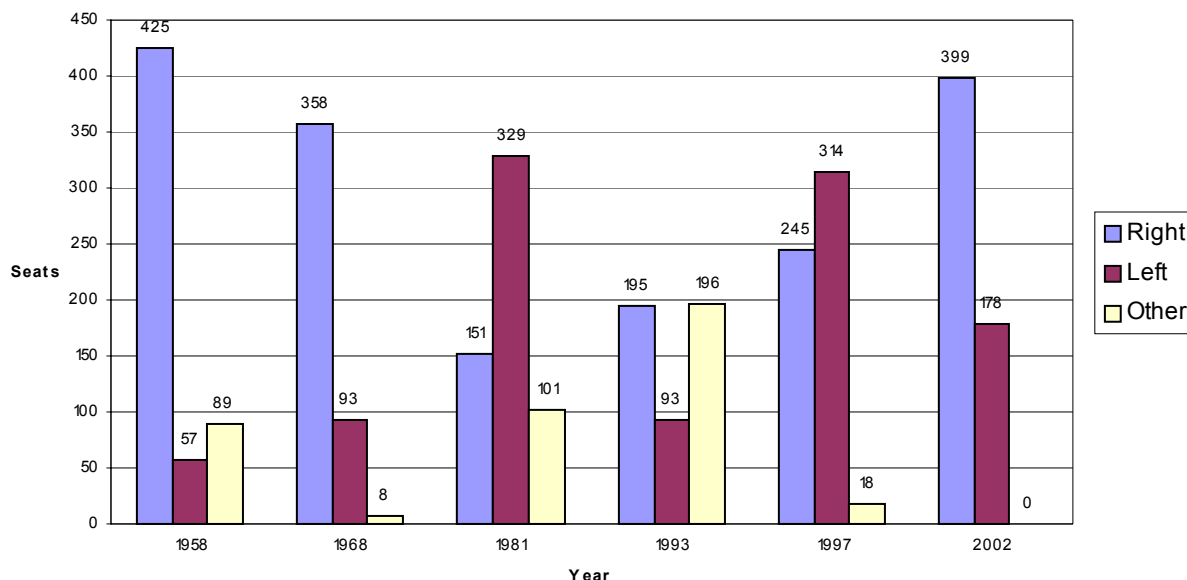
Figure 3: Incoming French National Assembly, 2002



Source: Le Monde, June 19, 2002

We now know the results. (See Figure 1) In spite of a rather good campaign by the Socialist Party (but not by its allies), the voters of France elected a "blue horizon" National Assembly, so-called from the name attached to the 1919 rightist Chamber of Deputies. A single party (the "Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle" or UMP, created between the two rounds of the Presidential election by Chirac) holds an outright majority in the National Assembly, and for the first time in the Fifth Republic, both Gaullist and non-Gaullist rightists will be part of the same organisation. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4: French National Assembly Majorities in Historical Perspective



Act Five (The Government's Program, the Present). Now, we seem to have entered the fifth and final act. Having created a new, more stable configuration of power, the majority of French voters, who did not know much about Chirac's program before the election and certainly did not endorse it, now approve of it. Not only did 88% of the rightist voters say, in a June 14 poll, that they wanted M. Raffarin to be re-appointed as Prime Minister, but so did 60% of the leftist voters. Massive majorities, of 70 to 80%, now accept the right's ideas about, for example, reducing the income tax, allowing companies leeway in implementing the 35-hour week, and reducing the social charges levied on employers. It is a delayed effect, but the logic is the same: "it's their turn." Nonetheless, the new government still faces several problems that were raised during the election season, but which remain unsolved. Two of the most important:

- M. Raffarin is right to emphasize, in his call for "community democracy" (*democratie de proximité*), his ideas for another way of conducting politics and for the necessity of dialogue, concertation and participation. These demands are very much present in public opinion polls and they are not fads, as some decision-makers seem to think. The French population is ready for reforms, even reforms that affect civil servants, teachers or health services personnel, where movement is often presented as "stalled."
- More than ever, French citizens talk about "globalisation" ("mondialisation"), and the mysterious "financial markets" that seem to propel the process. They approve overwhelmingly of its effects on French consumers, on French companies, and even on the country as a whole, but in similar proportions they fear its consequences for both the French (or European) "social model", and in terms of their particularly French way of life. Reconciling these hopes and fears remains the government's principle challenge.