The French Presidential Election: An Assessment

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In the Constitution of the Fifth Republic (founded by General Charles de Gaulle in 1958), the presidency is the key-stone of French institutions. Presidential elections are dramatic moments in the country's democratic life: the people of the Republic choses by direct universal suffrage the incarnation of its sovereignty for five years. (The term was seven years until the 2001 constitutional revision: see US-France Analysis by Olivier Duhamel, "France's New Five-Year Presiential Term, http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cusf/analysis/quinquennat.htm).

The President of the Republic is elected by an absolute majority of votes cast. If no candidate obtains a majority on the first ballot, a second ballot is organized with the two candidates who have won the greatest number of votes in the first ballot. This two-round system avoids an election with only a relative majority and prevents third party candidates-such as Ross Perot or Ralph Nader in recent American elections-from distorting the outcome. The French believe this would weaken the bond between the nation and its supreme representative.

Any French citizen who meets certain eligibility criteria can run for president. These criteria include paying a deposit of €153,000 and getting "500 signatures"-the patronage of at least 500 elected officials (from a list of about 45,000) from 30 *départements*. There are some 15 official candidates in the 2002 election (see table). The final contest, however, will be a showdown between two, and only two, competitors. In this election, despite signs that the main party candidates are not inspiring voters and the somewhat unexpected popularity of the Citizens' Movement leader Jean-Pierre Chevènement, there is little doubt that the final competitors will be conservative President Jacques Chirac and his socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin. Their dominant positions have been so evident that they waited until the end of February-two months before the elections-to officially announce their candidacies.

2002 Top French Presidential Election Candidates

Candidate	**Party**
Jacques Chirac	RPR- United Republican Party
Lionel Jospin	PS – Socialist Party
Jean-Pierre Chevènevement	MdC – People's Movement
Jean-Marie Le Pen	FN – National Front
Noël Mamère	Verts – Green Party
Robert Hue	PCF – French Communist Party
Arlette Laguiller	LO – Worker's Rights
Alain Madelin	DL – Liberal Democracy
François Bayrou	UDF – Union of French Democracy
Daniel Gluckstein	PT- Worker's Party
Charles Pasqua	RPF – The United France Party

Chirac and Jospin are very well known. Both have been in national politics for decades. Chirac, 69, entered Georges Pompidou's government in 1967 and was Prime Minister for the first time in 1974, while Jospin, 64, started his career as a minister in 1988, after high level responsibilities in the socialist party since the 1970s. Both attended the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, training ground for France's top bureaucrats. Their styles are very different, however. Jacques Chirac's charisma, his great talent for communication—not unlike Bill Clinton's—contrast with Lionel Jospin's sober, sincere but reserved style—not unlike Al Gore's.

Each candidate has his own problems. The President is surrounded by scandals linked to financing of his party in the 1980s and 1990s, while the Prime Minister faces social protests from groups including military personnel, policemen, doctors and nurses. Chirac and Jospin have shared executive power for the past five years thanks to a constitutional oddity called "cohabitation." This occurs when the President, elected directly by a majority of citizens' votes, is not from the same political family as the Prime Minister who reflects the parliament's majority, which comes from a separate election. Once improbable, the constitutional possibility of cohabitation first became a reality when President François Mitterrand, after the socialist defeat of 1986, appointed his rival Jacques Chirac as a Prime Minister and stayed in office. The situation was repeated in 1993-95, once again under Mitterrand, and in 1997-2002, when Jacques Chirac's party lost the general elections that he had called. For five years the President and the Prime Minister have formed a now well-known *duo*.

The peculiarity of the situation is that the two major candidates have to defend their achievements, which impedes their ability to say what they would like to do. Alain Madelin, the neo-liberal candidate, thus complains that there is not much room for a debate about electoral programs. Indeed, there are few differences between the main candidates, but there are some. A key issue is Chirac's criticism of the left for its inability to contain crime. Recent figures are indeed a disaster: according to the Minister of Interior's 2002 official report, after remaining stable for several years crime shot up by 5.72% in 2000 and by 7.69 % in 2001. What is worse, the most significant rise concerns crimes against people, up by nearly 10%. "France is frightened," President Chirac contends. Another important theme is the left's difficulty with economics: a recently released study by Eurostat (the European Union office of statistics) shows that French GDP per capita fell to 12th place among the 15 European Union countries (it was 7th in 1995). To boost the economy, the right advocates tax cuts in a context where taxes reached a record level of 45.6% of GDP in 1999.

Yet these issues will not necessarily work against the left in this election. Jospin has already broken free from the left's traditional attitude towards crime, which was that it resulted mainly from social discrimination. His solutions, which involve fighting juvenile delinquency (though 80% of crimes are committed by adults), are not very far from the right's proposals—to the point that each party accuses the other of copying its ideas. Where the economy is concerned, Jospin's record is hardly a disaster, especially where the most enduring problem of the French economy, unemployment, is concerned. From 1997 to 1999, over one million new jobs were created. In 5 years, the number of unemployed dropped by more than 900,000. The Socialists have even moved to cut taxes, with Finance Minister Laurent Fabius pledging more than €18 billion in cuts over the coming three years, especially for low wage earners. The growth of public spending was slowed to an average of 0.35% per year compared to 1.8% under previous right-wing governments.

On more political grounds, a remarkable inversion is worth noting. Jospin now charges that by staying in office while his majority was defeated in a general election, Chirac has weakened the French presidency, which Lionel Jospin proposes to "restore" to its former authority. This is quite ironic for socialists who long fought de Gaulle's presidential institutions—which Mitterrand once referred to as a "permanent *coup d'état*." Some Socialists, like Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Lionel Jospin's former minister of economy and finances, even call for a "Sixth Republic" with a fully presidential regime, an evolution already defended by the left radical party (a moderate social liberal party). This would put the cohabitation system, widely seen as problematic, to an end.

The problem of such debates is that they carefully avoid some important issues. Everybody recognizes that the biggest reform that the next president will have to face is the reorganization of the pension system. Yet the leading candidates are largely avoiding the issue in the campaign, because they know that voters are keen to maintain a generous state-based system and have little confidence in the fairness of systems based on private savings. Another issue is social expenditures: even though Chirac has promised to be more generous with doctors while Lionel Jospin has faced major opposition from them, nobody has forgotten Prime Minister Alain Juppé's failed attempts to make spending cuts in 1995.

The lack of enthusiasm for the leading candidates and the lack of perceived differences between them explains the great attention paid to the notion of the "third man," the one who will not make the final ballot but who could influence the final decision because of his ideas and the votes he controls. Center-right leaders Jean-François Bayrou, a committed European, and Alain Madelin, a free-marketer, have failed to win much support and remain below 5% in the polls. On the left wing, ecologist Noel Mamère is doing only slightly better. The "third man" of the moment is thus Jean-Pierre Chevènement, from the left of the spectrum but who wins votes from the right as well by emphasizing the traditional values of the French Republic: equality; patriotism, sovereignty, order, and national unity (Chevènement broke with Jospin in 2000 and resigned as Minister of the Interior over a plan to give more autonomy to Corsica). Though he has little chance of winning or even of advancing to the second round, Chevènement could play an important role, perhaps even demanding important ministries for his allies as a price for backing Jospin in a runoff against Chirac.

Two sources of uncertainty remain. First, it is difficult to evaluate the importance of the extreme-right, which has influenced elections since the 1980's by weakening moderate right-wing electorates and attracting "protest votes." The aging extremist leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is expected to win up to 10% of the vote should he get the required "500 signatures." Another issue is the relationship between the presidential election in April and the legislative ones in June. Most analysts tend to exclude the possibility of a new cohabitation. Recent political history, however, has shown that French voters do not hesitate to choose it in a political system that otherwise knows few other checks and balances. Jacques Chirac would probably not suffer much from such a situation, which he is by now quite used to. Jospin as president with a rightist majority, however, would be a political earthquake: either Jospin would resign from office, which would be logical for someone who claims to support a strong presidency, but this would be the end of the presidential preeminence over the general elections. Or he would remain, leading to the conclusion that even he, who proudly stresses that he "does what he says, and says what he does," is not able to keep his promises. A new cohabitation after April 2002 might raise real questions about the constitution of the Fifth Republic.

Presidential Elections Under the Fifth Republic 1959-1995
(second round election results)

1959	Charles de Gaulle elected (by 78% of the electoral college)
1965	President de Gaulle (54.5%) defeats Socialist candidate François Mitterrand (45.5%)
1969	Gaullist candidate Georges Pompidou (57.5%) defeats Centrist candidate Alain Poher (42.4%)
1974	Center-Right candidate Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (50.6%) defeats Socialist candidate François Mitterrand (49.3%)
1981	Socialist candidate François Mitterrand (52.22%) defeats Center-Right President Giscard d'Estaing (47.77%)
1988	Socialist President François Mitterrand (54%) defeats Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac (46%)
1995	Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac (52.6%) defeats Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin (47.4%)