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The 2007' French Presidential Election

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There are two ways to deal with the coming French presidential election. The first is to focus on the appearances. And there is a good chance that, according to this method, Nicolas Sarkozy will be the next French president.

Let me remind you of all the facts that strengthen this thesis:

- For more than three months, all the polls, more than 80 of them, placed him at head in the first ballot with around 30 Percent of the votes. He wins in the second ballot too, against the socialist Ségolène Royal, with 54 Percent versus 46 Percent, with an increasing difference for a few weeks;

- Moreover, Nicolas Sarkozy is considered to be the best prepared candidate and probably the most competent too. And even the people who don't like him agree with that;

- He is the most powerful candidate too, since he succeeded in taking control of the ruling UMP party more than two years ago and transformed it in an electoral machine dedicated only to his success. The UMP has the largest amount of public money because of his overwhelming success in the general election of 2002. Membership in the party increased dramatically for two year up to more than 300.000, three times the usual number for a ruling French party;

- Last but not least, Nicolas Sarkozy succeeded in gathering all the Right around him. All the "barons", the members of the

outgoing Government, the two former Prime Minister Alain Juppe and Jean-Pierre Raffarin, more than 500 French Representatives and Senators, thousands of local councilors. The very popular and respected Simone Veil, a former French Social Affairs secretary and President of the European Parliament, who as a Jewish child survived to the death camps during World War II, has campaigned for him. Even President Chirac brought him a relatively clear support a few weeks ago and his wife, the very popular French First Lady appeared in one of his meetings last week in the city of Lyon.

If you consider all these facts, the intrinsic weakness of the Left this year and of her candidate, there is no doubt that the Former French Homeland Secretary should win the election and I could stop my lecture at this point, thank you for your attention and go for a walk in Washington DC with my friends Gabriela and Norbert!

But there is a second way to deal with this election. It consists in paying attention to others kind of facts or informations that all tend to demonstrate that the success of Nicolas Sarkozy is all but certain. For instance, according to a recent poll (BVA 29 mars 2007), only 29 Percent of the people wish the election of Nicolas Sarkozy versus 52 Percent. The situation is the same for the other main candidates. Only 31 Percent of the voters are in favour of the election of the socialist Ségolène ROYAL (versus 50 Percent) and 29 Percent wish a success for

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François Bayrou against 47 Percent. In fact, there is no fancy for any of the candidates and it is a paradox of this campaign that is, by the way, very popular according to the number of people gathering in the meetings and the huge audience of the TV programmes dedicated to the election.

The emergence of a third candidate appears to be the main characteristic of this election up to that point and it is not possible to understand the coming scrutiny without trying to explain this phenomena. Furthermore, the high level of Jean-Marie le Pen and the presence of six candidates members of the "Far Left" renders particularly difficult to predict the result.

In fact, technically, a surprise is still possible and many pollsters refuse to dismiss the possibility of a weird final without Ségolène Royal and/or Nicolas Sarkozy. According to Gérard le Gall, a close poll adviser of Ségolène Royal, the political situation is an "ice rink" and everybody could fall. Nevertheless, he observed that there was "communicating vessels" between Mrs Royal and Mr Bayrou that could be fatal to the socialist candidate.

At this point, the proportion of the voters who have made their choice is contained between 53 Percent and 58 Percent. And it seems that a large part of the others will decide in the polling booth. The last days should therefore be decisive.

How is it possible to come out of that political smog? What is exactly at stake in this election? Who are the main candidates? What is their opinion of the relationship between France and the USA? I propose to answer briefly to all of these questions but first of all it could be useful to remind you of the basics of French politics and especially the role of the presidential election in the French democracy.

1) A DECISIVE MOMENT IN FRENCH POLITICS

The presidential election is the main political event, both in France and in the US. These two countries have in common this special

way to delegate confidence, national sovereignty and legal authority to one person. In most others democracies, the executive power is the privilege of a Prime minister who's the head of the party which won the general elections. There is not the same kind of relationship between a Prime minister and the people. In England, Germany, Italy and Spain, even if the political system is becoming more and more presidential and centred around the Prime minister, the elections' first objective is to make a choice between two programs, two parties or coalitions. The Prime minister, at the beginning, is just one representent among many others elected by a few thousands voters.

In France, as in the US, the president has to seduce millions of voters to get the job. Therefore, the personality of the candidates, their personal values, their way of living, their family, their attitude, the way they talk, smile, behave with their entourage are as important as their program. First of all, people vote for a man or a woman, to represent themselves, to embody the Nation and to serve their interests. That last point is probably the one which distinguish the more the French and the US President. In a "law centred" society like France, the President has the power to pass any bill he wants, even sometimes major changes in the Constitution either by convoking a referendum or turning to the Parliament. The checks and balances exist but are not as developed as in the US. The Constitutional Counsel, the National Assembly, the Senate, the local authorities are better to slow down the Presidential power than to oppose it. The main consequence of the pre-eminence of the presidency is huge expectations for the People.

In France, you are not only voting for the one who should preserve the best democracy but also for the one who promises to improve the most your personal standards of living ! This is one reason of the increase of public spending for thirty years and, according to that criterion, the present election is true to itself if you look at the programme of the different candidates!

Nevertheless, this French presidential election is very particular and it is needed to explain why if you want to understand what is at stake and the meaning of the result.

II) A BREAK IN FRENCH POLITICAL HISTORY

1. The end of a political cycle begun in the 1970s

The main characteristic of this election is that, for the first time for more than thirty years, the candidates are new! It is the end of a political cycle which began in 1974 with the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing who defeated François Mitterrand with the help of Jacques Chirac who became Prime minister as a reward for.

In 1981, Jacques Chirac is told to have favoured the election of socialist François Mitterrand in order to get ride of the outgoing President. In 1988, François Mitterrand defeated Jacques Chirac, who finally was elected in 1995 and re-elected in 2002, each time against Lionel Jospin.

If François Mitterrand was an old fashioned politician, in love with classical culture and shared a lot of references with general de Gaulle, Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin represent the typical French technocrat of post second world war era, largely inspired by the welfare state, Keynesian economics, and suspicious about free market. President Chirac didn't hesitate to state recently that economic liberalism was an ideology as dangerous as communism! Even if that statement refers above all to the excess of a society driven only by free market, it is typical of a common thought of French politicians that the State is at the centre of the society and of the economy. This conception, largely shared by both the Right and the Left, deeply impregnated the political debate for thirty years. For the best if you think about public programmes of development in nuclear energy; high speed train, aircrafts, public hospitals. For the worst if you refers to the French unemployment rate, public debt, bankruptcy of the public owned bank Credit Lyonnais.

For years, the idea of a "French social model" was a useful excuse not to deal with many problems such as enduring unemployment, uncontrolled immigration and development of ghettos, closing of factories...

Growing discontent provoked the political earthquake of 2002 materialized by the qualifying of Jean-Marie le Pen for the second round of the election.

The next election will introduce a new political cycle because the main candidates are all fifty-years old and grew up after the moral crisis of 1968 and the economic crisis of 1973. They are the first generation borne at the age of image and television. They've understood the importance of communication and opinion polls. The next election will also break with what is called "pensée unique", the mainstream of French political elite characterized by European integrationism, silence about immigration, fears about free market... It is what I call the "End of taboos".

2. "The End of taboos"

The result of the 2002' election created a shock among French politicians. Many of them realized that it was necessary to change the way they were doing politics if they want to find again the attention of the people. The large failure of the referendum confirmed the growing lost of confidence of the people for the politicians and accelerate their awareness.

The CEVIPOF is a very serious research institution dedicated to political science and elections. It created a political barometer in order to measure the confidence of the People toward the political class. The results are stunning. All along last year, between 60 Percent and 70 Percent of the People refused to trust the ruling political class, both the Right and the Left. They were 46 Percent in this situation 10 years ago. If you have a look to the details of the study, you can observe that the growing category concerns those who are used to consider themselves either a sympathizer of the Left or of the Right but who don't trust them anymore.

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The proportion of those who placed themselves out of the political system is staying steady.

If you pay attention to the breakdown of the study according social criteria, you can observe that the largest progression of mistrust concerns the teachers, the employees and the retail merchants (20 to 23 points). It means that the political crisis is spreading all around the society, across all social classes. It is not ever an opposition between insiders and outsiders, today, a majority of the French people is considering a vote of sanction.

Considering that the growing of mistrust is particularly high among voters of the Left (teachers, employees), the CEVIPOF estimates that one third of the voters of the Socialist party may prefer to vote for a non-socialist candidate and for a candidate of the right for one out of six socialist voters.

That is the reason why the level of the Left is considered extremely low at the moment, probably less than 40 Percent and why the volatility of the voters is, on the contrary, very high. It is what I called the "political ice rink".

In order to deal with this situation, the main candidates decided to break with usual French politics, references to the "French social model" and the "pensée unique". Whereas Jean-Marie Le Pen had for years the monopole of bashing against globalization, immigration, insecurity, red tape, overtaxing... all his competitors are more or less entering his business in order to deal with the fears of public opinion. It is what I call the End of taboos.

Nicolas Sarkozy embodies this new politics. He didn't hesitate to propose the creation of a "Department of immigration and national identity" in order to control immigration.

Each immigrant, for instance, would be supposed to speak French before entering national territory. It was largely considered as an indecent proposal by most of politicians but a large majority of the opinion agreed. In order to fight unemployment, he proposed to subdue benefits to the acceptance

of an activity. He wants also to reduce taxes and even suppress most of estate taxes.

If you listen to Nicolas Sarkozy's speeches, you may be surprised to hear a less presidential tone. A large part of his success is due to his capacity to talk like "the common man". For instance, he appreciates to name properly the behaviours. Whereas it was used in French politics to talk about "young people" to describe juvenile delinquent mostly issued of immigration, he is not afraid of using the terms "lout" or even "riff-raff".

It is important to note that what is called "populism" by his opponents is clearly claimed as a strategy to fish the National Front vote. There is nothing surprising therefore about that 30 Percent of the people who consider themselves out of the political system intend to vote Sarkozy according to the CEVIPOF study. It is twice the score of Jean-Marie Le Pen in this category of the population.

It is that strategy centred on the "real people" and "the honest Frenchmen", those who wake up early to work hard, to pay taxes and who don't have social benefits that explains the high level of popularity of Nicolas Sarkozy among the popular class and, in the same time, the high degree of mistrust from the intellectual Left and sometime violent dislike from the far Left and the young people in the ghettos.

This strategy of transgression has a very important interest. It may bring back to the Republican Right many people who didn't trust anymore democratic institutions. In that way, it may be good news for the future of French politics. On the other way, this break may also create violent crisis in the society if some people take this new voluntarism as a pretext for contest or riots.

It is interesting to observe that Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-Marie LE PEN are not the only ones to practise transgression. Ségolène ROYAL won the campaign for the socialist nomination in November because of her ability to drive from the field the old so-

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cialist "Elephants" and shake many of the socialist dogmas.

She proposed, for instance, to institute military training for juvenile delinquents whereas the party is known for its pacifist roots. She also created disquiet when she said that the imposition of a maximum 35 hour working week worsened the situation of many workers.

More recently, she asked to the audience in her meeting to sing the National hymn, "La Marseillaise". Only the Gaullists were used to sing it in the past whereas the socialist preferred the "International".

Consequently, for the many ones who didn't know the words, they had to prepare a PowerPoint. This episode was at the origins of a new disquiet... François Bayrou, the third man in this election, had become a rebel of his own when he turned against the government two years ago and refused to vote either the budget and confidence in the Cabinet.

Whereas the Centre in French politics used to be very reasonable and even timorous, he adopted a more direct speech and a bolder programme. He insisted on the need to reduce public spending. He proposed a radical change of the Constitution. He declared that he intended to gather around him either the officials of the Left and of the Right if he were elected. In fact, Mr Bayrou is taking advantage of the weakness of the Left who wasn't able to modernize itself and to abandon its marxist references. He understood that there was a space for new candidate at the centre Left of the political chessboard that furthermore would held a very offensive speech against the "system". It was a good shot because if Mr Bayrou made only around 6 Percent in 2002, the polls give him around 18 Percent to 20 Percent today.

III - WHAT MAY BE THE RESULT OF THE ELECTION?

At this point, it appears difficult to imagine the result of the election. If Nicolas Sarkozy appears to be the most solid candidate, its

strategy to lure voters from Mr le Pen created the possibility of an alliance between the Left and the Centre, what we call the "Tout sauf Sarkozy". According to that situation, Mr Michel Rocard, a respected former Prime Minister of François Mitterrand called in Le Monde last Friday for a formal agreement now between Ségolène Royal and François BAYROU in order to govern together. This point of view created a large mess in the socialist party during last week end.

Finally, the result of the election would depend only of the strategy of Nicolas Sarkozy. If it appears that he was right to seduce the popular class according the analysis which tends to explain that most of the people wanted the return of political voluntarism, he should win. If it appears that these people prefers "the original", that is to say Jean-Marie le Pen, the strategy of Nicolas Sarkozy would have only created the conditions of an alliance of the Left and the Centre which will crush him at the second round.

IV – THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ELECTION ON FRENCH-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP

The main topic the campaign doesn't deal with is Foreign Affairs. Most of the candidates have presented some proposals in order to tackle with the European crisis initiated by the reject of the European constitution in both France and the Netherlands. For the first time, for years, the socialist candidate has even stated that the credits dedicated to defence policy wouldn't be diminished if she were elected opening the path to a kind of consensus on that matter.

But it is still hard to imagine the consequences of the election for French Foreign policy. More specifically, all the candidates agreed to consider that the main success of the out coming president was his results in that matter. The situation in Iraq has strengthened the opinion of the French people that the war was not a good idea. If the French public opinion favours a retreat of US troops, French leaders are aware of the difficulties to let the Iraqis alone and there

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is a concern about integrity of Iraq. It is important to notice that the French commitment in Afghanistan is not challenged even though new modern aircrafts were engaged two weeks ago. There is also a consensus between the Right and the Left about the need to protect the Lebanon independence. The main differences concern in fact two main topics: Turkey and the Palestine. Nicolas Sarkozy and the UMP are strongly opposed to a European Union membership for Turkey unlike the Socialist Party. It is important to notice on that subject that due to a constitutional change in the French constitution in 2005, an adherence of Turkey should be decided through a referendum. Ségolène Royal explained that her position would be the result of the referendum.

Concerning the situation of Israel and Palestine, Nicolas Sarkozy clearly took position in his book, published last summer, for the end of the "French Arab policy". According to him, the Arab world is not unique and it is needed to have a policy for all the different Arab areas of the world. He considers that it is not possible to subdue our relationship with Israel to the the situation in Arab countries. Consequently, event if he refers to the right of the Palestinian people to have their own state, he introduces a break in French foreign policy in considering that Israel is a modern democracy whereas its neighbours are not.

In fact, the situation is the same considering the relationship between France and the US. Even if he recognizes that they're may some disagreements between governments and especially with the present one, the president of the UMP consider that there is an historical common background that must prevail over differences at any times. It is why Nicolas Sarkozy regretted the French' threat to use its veto in 2003 about the Iraqi crisis.

But it would be a great mistake to consider that if Mr Sarkozy were elected, France would become atlantist the next day. There would be an evolution, very mild and progressive, toward a less passionate relationship but not necessarily a more conniving one. France won't be Great Britain by the

way. In conclusion, the French presidential election of next week will be very important for France, for Europe and even for other countries but it is not clear that the result will be the consequence of a massive vote in one way or the other or the complicated outcome of billiards with too many cushions. In the first case, the country will engage a new political cycle with a new course that should benefit to everyone. In the other case, it may enter a real political crisis that may weaken European Union and even the Atlantic alliance for years.

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